

But what might we say if a timely and significant reduction is not achieved through international negotiations? An answer that some philosophers give is that it makes no difference whether any particular individual reduces his or her carbon footprint. The assumption underlying this pessimistic view is that we cannot say that any individual activity or lifestyle choices cause the harms associated with climate change.

My driving a gas guzzling automobile, or taking solo trips in my private jet involves no injustice, they say. The assumption behind this claim is that I have acted unjustly only when my action is sufficient to cause the harm. We all know that the harm is a product of relatively small contributions of many people, over many generations, to greenhouse gas accumulation. Thus, their claim is, it makes no moral difference whether or not I reduce my carbon footprint. Nothing I will do will change anything.

Not all philosophers accept the pessimist premise that wrongdoing necessarily requires that a person's action be the sufficient cause of harm to an identifiable individual. A different approach says that we act unjustly when we violate some universal moral responsibility. By exposing the most vital interest of others to a potentially grave harm, without sufficient justification. But let's just stipulate that one way for individuals to avoid injustices associated with climate change is to reduce, or better yet, eliminate their own carbon footprint. Reduction might take many forms: eating less land based animals, especially cattle, and many other activities that carry a very high carbon footprint. As individuals, we still face what might seem to be intractable moral demands. How might the global affluent reduce personal greenhouse gas emissions to at least the level of subsistence emissions that citizens of developing nations are entitled to emit? Or even eliminate entirely our personal carbon footprint?

Moral philosopher and economist John Broome has argued that we can take steps to offset our personal carbon footprint. For example, we can purchase carbon offsets from organizations that use the money we give them to fund carbon sinks that absorb greenhouse gases. Such offset opportunities are found, for example, in protecting rainforest and wetlands. As Broome and others calculate it, we can zero out the personal carbon footprint for an average American or European family for roughly \$300 per year. Now, not every family in rich countries can afford this, but the point is that the moral duty is most incumbent on those who can afford it, and whose standard of living produces the most greenhouse gases.

There are well known practical objections to individual reduction of carbon footprint through lifestyle changes and carbon offset strategies. For example, let's suppose that many of us do change our behavior and use less fossil fuels. Economists will remind us that the price of energy will drop, and as a result, others will use more of a commodity that our action has now made more affordable. Our actions seem for naught, at least if the intended effect is to reduce aggregate fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas production. Similar argument regarding the futility of personal action is lodged against carbon offsets. One problem, of course, is verifiability of actual offset. Another problem is that there are inherent limits to how many offsetting opportunities there are in the world. But even if the objection is right in doubting that offsetting is a permanent solution, it's not an objection against encouraging as many people who can do so now to act in order to delay on so the worst consequences.

Note that the primary rationale I've relied upon here for personal offsetting lies not merely in buying more time, or even in saving aggregate lives over the long run. Both of these concerns are important, as John Broome has argued. Carbon offsetting is a personal way to discharge our most urgent duties of justice toward those who would be hurt first and worse. Personal offsetting, perhaps, is not the whole of what climate justice demands of individuals. There's still duties to support just institutions, and that means support for international action. But it is worth noting that the costs of personal offsetting are not exorbitant for many of the world's most affluent. And for the global affluent, there are few imaginable justifications for failing to do so. It does not demand fundamental changes in the very way of life of developed nations, nor does it impose harsh burdens on developing nations that suffer from a lack of energy sources to combat extreme poverty. The personal duty applies to rich people in poor nations, just as it permits poor people in rich nations to emit for the sake of basic necessities of life.