

WHEN TO START SAVING THE PLANET?

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GLOBAL WARMING reduces crop yields, increases species extinction, and threatens the future of Pacific Island Nations.¹ Intuitively, such alarming climate harms call for immediate action. However, the claim that individuals have a duty to prevent climate harms faces two important problems. First, individuals can rarely if ever avert a climate harm on their own. Second, often too few people are willing to contribute.² Climate duty skeptics take the first problem to entail that individuals are never obligated to reduce their carbon footprint, unless their government forces them to.³ A couple of considerations suggest that things are not so bleak. Individuals can in some cases *help* prevent climate harms. Furthermore, they can often *activate* others and thereby increase the number of people who are willing to contribute. But there is a further problem. The process of activating enough people takes time. This poses a threat to what I call the “urgency intuition” according to which preventive action is required soon, if not immediately.

Saving this intuition requires a new conception of the duty not to harm, or, more precisely, of its causal and epistemic preconditions. Robert Goodin, Holly Lawford-Smith, and Stephanie Collins have argued that an individual is obligated to contribute to a collective outcome only if enough others are willing to do so as well.⁴ The underlying idea is that the morally desirable outcome can be brought about successfully only if there is a critical mass of willing individuals. This forms the core of what I call the “success proviso.” However, as just

- 1 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Global Warming of 1.5° c.”
- 2 Mitigating climate change involves many other challenges, such as power asymmetries between the rich and the poor and the fact that most of those who will be affected have not yet been born (Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*).
- 3 Sinnott-Armstrong “It’s Not My Fault”; Cripps, *Climate Change and the Moral Agent*. As I discuss in section 2, Cripps allows for such obligations in exceptional circumstances, when all possibilities for promoting collective action have been exhausted (*Climate Change and the Moral Agent*, 164).
- 4 Goodin, “Excused by the Unwillingness of Others?”; Lawford-Smith, “Unethical Consumption and Obligations to Signal” and “What ‘We?’”; and Collins, *Group Duties*.

mentioned, often too few individuals are willing to contribute and take preventive action.⁵ When this is the case, the success proviso entails that people become obligated to take preventive action only once enough others have been activated. For instance, turning off your air conditioning at night or taking a train rather than a plane will be required only once enough others are willing to do the same. Because of this, the success proviso fails to preserve the urgency intuition.

The alternative that I propose here turns on the prospect of success. In order for an individual to be obligated to take preventive action, this prospect must be good enough. By this I mean that it must be reasonably likely and suitably clear that the individual can help prevent the harm. As I argue below, this “prospect proviso” sometimes requires taking preventive action right from the start. And when others have to be activated first, this activation process might progress in such a promising manner that preventive actions are already required before it has been completed. For this to be the case, individuals must have enough reason to believe that a sufficient number of others will be activated. Strikingly, an individual will then be required to initiate preventive action already before the harm can in fact be prevented. In this way, the prospect proviso preserves the urgency intuition.

In section 1, I introduce what I call the “timing question,” which concerns the time at which preventive action is required in relation to the process of activation. In section 2, I critically discuss skepticism about climate duties. And in section 3, I discuss the non-skeptical positions mentioned and argue that the prospect proviso is to be preferred to the success proviso. Finally, in section 4, I distinguish different forms of activation and discuss how they influence the requisite timing of harm prevention. In these ways, attending to the timing question helps to shed light on the scope of the duty not to harm.

1. THE TIMING QUESTION

Many climate harms are caused by greenhouse gas emissions. Those harms are closely intertwined. I will assume, however, that there are particular climate harms that can be prevented when enough people reduce their carbon footprint by a certain amount. Perhaps the sea level will rise less, such that fewer islands are submerged. Maybe a storm will be less severe, and some people who would otherwise have died will now survive. Thus, either people’s livelihoods are at stake or their lives are. Because climate harms are caused by several individuals, they are collective harms.

5 Batson, *What’s Wrong with Morality*; and Bandura, *Moral Disengagement*.

Preventing a collective harm is a collective action problem. Perhaps the major obstacle to solving collective action problems is that often too few individuals are willing to contribute to a solution.⁶ Although they might feel pressure to act, they frequently fail to do so. Psychologists have discovered that the wider the pool of required contributors, the less concerned people tend to be, and the less inclined to act.⁷ The common excuse is that others are not doing anything either. Albert Bandura captures this phenomenon of the diffusion of responsibility as follows: “When everybody is responsible, no one feels responsible.”⁸ Strikingly, he takes it for granted that people are responsible for collective harms.

When too few people are willing to contribute, preventing a collective harm is a two-step process.⁹ The first step is to activate others and increase the number of willing individuals. This serves to form a critical mass such that the individuals can prevent the harm by combining their efforts. The second step is to take preventive action, for instance by insulating your house and buying green energy. Both activation and prevention are ways of contributing to a morally desirable outcome. However, a preventive action is a direct or unmediated contribution. In contrast, someone who activates someone else makes an indirect contribution that is mediated by the other person. Its success is contingent on whether the other person makes a direct contribution. People can have an obligation to contribute directly, indirectly, or both.¹⁰

Intuitively, climate harms obligate people to take preventive action soon, if not immediately. This is the urgency intuition that I mentioned in the introduction. Anne Schwenkenbecher expresses it when she observes that “demands to reduce individual GHG emissions have a strong intuitive appeal.”¹¹ Although, or perhaps because, she does not mention time, I take her to mean that, intuitively, people should do so now. The fact that preventing a collective harm is often a two-step process presents a challenge to this intuition. Activation is often a

6 Batson, *What's Wrong with Morality*; and Bandura, *Moral Disengagement*.

7 Darley and Latané, “Bystander Intervention in Emergencies”; Batson, *What's Wrong with Morality*; Philpot et al. “Would I Be Helped?”

8 Bandura, *Moral Disengagement*, 62.

9 Hindriks, “The Duty to Join Forces.”

10 To contribute to a collective outcome is to perform an action that would generate that outcome if one or more other actions were also performed. In other words, a contribution is a necessary element of a set of actions that is sufficient for the outcome (Hart and Honoré, *Causation in the Law*; Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe*; Wright, “Causation, Responsibility, Risk, Probability, Naked Statistics, and Proof”).

11 Schwenkenbecher, “Is There an Obligation to Reduce One’s Individual Carbon Footprint?” 170.

time-consuming process, in particular when many people are involved. This means that, if activation has to precede making a contribution, this intuition has to be given up. In light of this, I ask what I call the “timing question”:

Timing Question (TQ): When do individuals acquire an obligation to take preventive action? Before or after the activation process has been completed?

Suppose that individuals acquire an obligation to activate others at t_0 . One answer to TQ is that they acquire the obligation to take preventive action at the same time. In this case, the activation and prevention stage overlap. Another is that they acquire it at t_1 , the moment at which enough others have successfully been activated. In this case, the period during which activation is required precedes that in which people ought to make a contribution. There is, however, no guarantee that the activation process will be successful. This entails that, in contrast to the first answer, the second answer leaves open the possibility that no one ever becomes obligated to contribute.

By way of illustration, consider the following example, which I adapt from Walter Sinnott-Armstrong:¹²

Joyguzzlers: A number of people living in an area occasionally drive their gas-guzzling cars for fun. Each can stop doing so and thereby reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, the harm they cause will decrease only if all of them stop driving their cars for fun.

This example raises a number of questions. Are joyguzzlers obligated to refrain from driving their gas-guzzling cars for fun? And how, if at all, does this depend on the number of joyguzzlers who are already willing to do so? Furthermore, if too few of them are willing, do they have an obligation to activate others? And, if so, what should they do in order to activate others? Finally, if they have a duty to activate, is it permissible to continue to joyguzzle until enough are willing to stop doing so such that their combined efforts prevent a climate harm? The last one of these closely connected questions is an instance of TQ.

Because livelihoods or even lives are at stake, it seems that joyguzzlers have no time to waste and should refrain from joyguzzling immediately. But they might object that doing so is futile as long as it is not possible to prevent any harm. The idea would be that, for it to make sense for one of them to stop joyguzzling, enough others must be ready to do so as well. This in turn requires that enough have been activated such that there is a critical mass of willing

12 Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not My Fault”; see also Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong, “What’s Wrong with Joyguzzling?”

individuals. And this will take time. As it might be difficult to sway enough joyguzzlers, this may in fact take a long time. These two considerations support different answers to TQ. What is at stake immediately is whether the urgency intuition can be preserved. Ultimately, however, these issues bear on the causal and epistemic preconditions of the duty not to harm.

Two existing proposals are the Harm Proviso and the Success Proviso:

Harm Proviso (HP): A harm obligates an agent only if she knows that she has control over it.

Success Proviso (SP): A harm obligates an agent only if she knows that she can help prevent it.

In what follows, I argue that these two provisos are too demanding. In light of this, I defend an alternative proposal, the Prospect Proviso:

Prospect Proviso (PP): A harm obligates an agent only if the prospect that she can help prevent it is good enough.

As I argue below, PP supports obligations in a plausibly wide range of cases. Furthermore, it is the only proposal that preserves the urgency intuition.

2. CLIMATE DUTY SKEPTICISM

The skeptical answer to TQ is: *never*. The underlying idea is that obligations presuppose causal control. An agent has control over an outcome exactly if she is able to bring it about and able to prevent it.¹³ This requires that she can perform an action that is both necessary and sufficient for it. Causal control can plausibly be combined with the similarly restrictive epistemic requirement of knowledge. Together, these requirements form HP.

Climate harms are collective harms that can typically be prevented only if a substantial number of individuals contribute. Because of this, HP is rarely met for such harms. An individual cannot prevent such a harm on her own. Furthermore, it is not necessary that she contributes when there are others who could do so.

Even so, it is in principle possible for an individual to have control over a collective harm. This will be the case when the following two conditions are met: first, enough others have already contributed such that only one more contribution is required; second, there is no one else around who will make it. Suppose opening a vault requires each of two individuals to turn a key. One has

13 Frankfurt refers to the ability to prevent the outcome as the “principle of alternate possibilities” (“Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility”).

already done so. In this situation, the individual who possesses the other key has control over whether the vault is opened. However, in particular when it comes to climate harms, such situations will be rare. Climate harm prevention usually require many contributions, which means that a particular individual will hardly ever play a pivotal role. It follows that, if HP is correct, individuals will rarely if ever have a duty to take preventive action with respect to a climate harm. Thus, HP supports skepticism about individual climate duties.

In this vein, Sinnott-Armstrong argues that a single individual does not as such cause climate harms and cannot avert them.¹⁴ It follows that joyguzzlers do not have to stop driving their gas guzzlers for fun. More generally, climate harms do not obligate individuals to take preventive action.¹⁵ Sinnott-Armstrong goes on to argue that global warming is a problem that “governments need to fix.”¹⁶ His argument is that “global warming is such a big problem that it is not individuals who cause it or who need to fix it.”¹⁷ The underlying idea must be that governments have control over climate harms. Sinnott-Armstrong also argues that people should encourage their governments to prevent climate harms and work for political candidates who are intent on changing government policies.¹⁸

These two ways of mitigating his skepticism fail. First, if HP is correct, it applies to direct as well as indirect contributions. And individuals do not control the outcomes of either of these.¹⁹ For instance, someone who works for the campaign team of a political candidate does not control whether she is elected. It follows that individuals cannot be obligated to contribute indirectly either.²⁰ Second, HP also applies to collective agents. And there may well be climate harms over which governments do not have control. When this is the case, HP implies that they are not required to do anything, even if they could help prevent them by collaborating with other governments. This reveals that, in order for his position to be coherent, Sinnott-Armstrong should support

14 Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not *My* Fault.”

15 Although he is not concerned with the climate, Jackson presents an argument that has the same implication (“Group Morality”).

16 Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not *My* Fault,” 312.

17 Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not *My* Fault,” 312.

18 For an overview of criticisms of Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument, see Fragnière, “Climate Change and Individual Duties.”

19 Hiller, “Climate Change and Individual Responsibility,” 364–65.

20 Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong (“What’s Wrong with Joyguzzling?” 185n22) claim that Cripps (*Climate Change and the Moral Agent*) has solved this problem. However, what they need is an argument that establishes that indirect contributions meet HP. And, as I discuss below, Cripps only argues that indirect contributions are often more effective than direct contributions.

skepticism about almost all individual climate duties, whether they concern direct or indirect contributions. Furthermore, it should also extend to some climate duties of collective agents.

Elizabeth Cripps is also rather skeptical about individual preventive obligations with respect to climate.²¹ However, her argument turns on effectiveness rather than control. She compares preventive actions to what she calls “promotional actions,” which are indirect contributions that range from writing letters to members of Congress to running for office. Such actions are meant to promote collective action, for instance by the government. Cripps argues that such indirect contributions are often more effective than direct contributions, because they can “contribute to a stockpile of impetus for collective change.”²² And she concludes that preventive actions are required only in exceptional circumstances, when all possibilities for promoting collective action have been exhausted.²³ Unfortunately, she is not very specific about the causal and epistemic preconditions of collective obligations. Her argument presupposes a proviso that is weaker than HP. But it remains unclear on exactly which proviso she relies. The upshot is that HP entails skepticism about climate duties. Because of this, it fails to preserve the urgency intuition.²⁴

3. THE PROSPECT OF SUCCESS

3.1. *The Success Proviso*

Individuals can sometimes help bring about a morally desirable collective outcome. Think, for instance, of helping a neighbor jump-start his car. Similarly, a paramedic might save someone’s life while being assisted by an emergency medical technician who drives an ambulance. And someone might form part of a human chain that ends up saving a drowning swimmer. It appears that in

21 Cripps, *Climate Change and the Moral Agent*.

22 Cripps, *Climate Change and the Moral Agent*, 148.

23 Cripps, *Climate Change and the Moral Agent*, 164.

24 Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 70. When discussing the preventive obligations of collective agents, Cripps considers situations in which a collective agent who is able to prevent the harm is yet to be formed (*Climate Change and the Moral Agent*, 3, 51–57). In such situations, individuals cannot take preventive action before they have incorporated themselves. It follows that the incorporation process necessarily precedes the prevention process, irrespective of which proviso is correct. Note that in many cases no individual has control over the incorporation process. Even so, it may well be that individuals can have a duty to incorporate (Held, “Can a Random Collection of Individuals Be Morally Responsible?”; Cripps, *Climate Change and the Moral Agent*; Collins 2013, *Group Duties*). This provides another reason for rejecting HP.

such cases individuals have a duty to take preventive action. If so, HP must be mistaken. Derek Parfit rejects it in effect when he argues that “even if an act harms no one, this act may be wrong because it is one of a *set* of acts that *together* harm other people.”²⁵

The natural alternative is that the agent must be in a position to *help* prevent the harm. Crucially, “to help” is a success verb. Someone helps save a victim’s life, for instance, only if she actually survives. Because of this, I call this alternative proposal the Success Proviso (SP).²⁶ An agent can help prevent a harm precisely if, given the dispositions of the others, her preventive action is sufficient for preventing the harm.²⁷ In contrast to HP, SP can be met for several individuals at once. It could be that your preventive action is sufficient for preventing a harm given my disposition and vice versa. When this is the case, one possible state of affairs obligates several individuals. In other words, the pending collective harm gives rise to an obligation that is at least weakly collective in that it pertains to multiple agents.²⁸

Holly Lawford-Smith and Stephanie Collins give further substance to SP when they argue that an individual should take preventive action on the condition that enough others are prepared to do so.²⁹ Furthermore, if too few individuals are willing to do so, those that are ought to signal their conditional willingness to others. The underlying idea is that when enough have signaled their willingness, they know that the harm can be prevented by combining their efforts. At this point, SP is met, which means that they are required to take preventive action. Crucially, this entails that, in the kind of situation at issue, preventive obligations are conditional and have the following content: to take preventive action

25 See also Braham and Van Hees, “An Anatomy of Moral Responsibility”; Spiekermann, “Small Impacts and Imperceptible Effects”; Pinkert, “What If I Cannot Make a Difference (and Know It)”; and Nefsky, “How You Can Help, without Making a Difference.”

26 See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 77–78. Schwenkenbecher proposes a slightly weaker proviso when she argues that individuals have a duty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions only if “they know that enough other people are highly likely to act this way” (“Is There an Obligation to Reduce One’s Individual Carbon Footprint?” 178). The prospect proviso that I propose below is weaker still in that it requires this probability to exceed a threshold that need not be high at all.

27 Furthermore, an individual can have an obligation to take preventive action even if someone else were ready to do so in case she would fail to fulfill it.

28 As an obligation is a forward-looking responsibility, SP supports the idea that people might bear collective responsibility with respect to the harm. Note, however, that this notion of collective responsibility is consistent with reductionism (Narveson, “Collective Responsibility”).

29 Lawford-Smith, “Unethical Consumption and Obligations to Signal,” 322, and “What ‘We?’” 229; and Collins, *Group Duties*, 120–21.

if enough others have signaled their conditional willingness to do so as well. Thus, the obligation to signal is part of the obligation to take preventive action.

Importantly, this entails that preventive obligations come into existence only after the signaling process has been completed. And this raises the question of what reason individuals have to signal. Not the preventive obligations, because obligations cannot pertain to the past. Collins argues that preventive obligations are partly constituted by mutual commitments.³⁰ To make sense of this, she invokes Goodin's account of how obligations can be created by exchanging conditional commitments.³¹ Each must say to the others: "I will if you will" and "I will if (you will if I will)."³² These statements express conditional commitments that become unconditional when all parties have made both of them. Crucially, nobody is obligated to do anything prior to this point. This is unproblematic when the conditional commitments are exchanged for independent reasons, as when two individuals want to do something but need each other's assurance to make it happen. However, in the case at hand, the condition pertains to signaling and is, at the same time, meant to be constitutive of the very obligation to signal, which is incoherent. The problem is that commitments cannot be constitutive of the obligation to communicate them, because obligations cannot pertain to the past.

To solve this problem, proponents of SP could say that, when someone has a conditional obligation, she is thereby obligated to satisfy the condition.³³ In the case under consideration, this means that someone who has the conditional obligation to take preventive action thereby has the obligation to signal her willingness. This reveals that SP can be defended in a coherent manner. However, at this point, another problem surfaces. Preventive obligations become unconditional only once the signaling process has been completed. In Collins's words, signaling "often serves as a precursor to more substantive coordinating actions."³⁴ This reveals that SP fails to preserve the urgency intuition. Thus, the way SP answers TQ is unsatisfactory.³⁵

30 Collins, *Group Duties*, 119–21.

31 Goodin, "Excused by the Unwillingness of Others?"

32 Goodin, "Excused by the Unwillingness of Others?" 24.

33 Goodin, "Excused by the Unwillingness of Others?" 23.

34 Collins, *Group Duties*, 120.

35 Collins maintains that preventive obligations presuppose group abilities (*Group Duties*, 217). This secures that the group members can generate the relevant outcomes in a robust manner. But this robustness requirement is too demanding. Consider a drowning swimmer who is rescued by a human chain that almost fell apart. Even though the rescue process was anything but robust, the individuals were obligated to help save him. It follows that group abilities are not required.

3.2. *The Prospect of Success*

What an individual can reasonably be expected to do in the face of a collective harm depends not on success, but on the prospect of success. This prospect has to be good enough. For this to be the case, it must be reasonably likely and suitably clear that they can thereby help prevent the harm. This is what I called the Prospect Proviso (PP) in section 1.

Just as SP, PP supports collective obligations in that a single harmful outcome can entail that several individuals have a duty to contribute to harm prevention. PP requires that there is some probability that the agent's contribution is sufficient for the outcome, given the contributions of the others. As such, it is weaker than SP, which requires sufficiency. Just as the other provisos, PP consists of a causal and an epistemic requirement. These can be analyzed and developed in more detail as follows:

Prospect: A harmful outcome obligates an agent to do *A* if and only if:

1. doing *A* sufficiently increases the probability that the harm will be prevented,
2. the probability that the harm will be prevented if the agent does *A* is high enough,
3. the agent has adequate reason to believe that conditions 1 and 2 are met, and
4. there are no defeaters.³⁶

The first two conditions constitute the causal requirement. First, the agent's contribution has to increase the probability of the outcome to a non-negligible and sufficient extent. This entails that a contribution can be too insignificant to be worthwhile. Second, the overall probability of success must be high enough. It may be high enough due to what everybody else is disposed to do. But it can also be that the contribution of the agent is needed in order for the threshold to be met. If this condition is met, the risk of failure is not too high. The third condition is the epistemic requirement that the agent must have enough reason to believe that the causal requirement is met. Finally, according to the fourth condition, the agent has no excuses or justifications that defeat the obligation.

³⁶ Prospect solves what I call the "problem of insignificant hands" (Hindriks, "The Problem of Insignificant Hands"). This is the problem of why anyone would be obligated to contribute to a morally significant outcome, even though the consequence of an isolated individual contribution is morally insignificant. Nefsky calls this "the inefficacy problem" ("Collective Harm and the Inefficacy Problem").

Each of the first three conditions features a threshold, as indicated by the phrases “high enough,” “sufficiently,” and “adequate.” Because of this, each of the conditions is either satisfied or not, depending on whether the threshold is met. An agent has a duty of the kind at issue only if all three of the conditions are met. Furthermore, the height of these thresholds is determined by two factors: first, how harmful the outcome is, and second, how costly the required action is.³⁷ Importantly, harms and costs can differ between cases. But the conditions of Prospect are meant to apply to all of them. Because of this, an account that is meant to be general cannot be specified in more precise terms. I should add that, just as in *SP*, *PP* is best understood in terms of a conditional obligation. The idea is that, at t_0 , individuals have the conditional obligation with the following content: to take preventive action if the prospect of success is high enough. Together with Prospect, this claim constitutes what I call the “prospect account.” Finally, this account is normative. To be sure, it features objective causal and epistemic facts. However, because of the thresholds, the ultimate question is whether these facts are weighty enough to constitute an obligation. This turns on the two factors just mentioned. And it is a normative question how weighty a harm is. The same holds for how much weight should be attached to the cost of making a contribution.

To illustrate how such normative factors can make a difference, consider a child who has lost her teddy bear in a mall. The parents trace their steps, and lots of people in different places help them look for it. After looking for a considerable amount of time, they have little reason to believe that they will find it, and the probability of finding it has become rather low. At this point, the prospect proviso ceases to be met and they are no longer obligated to look for the teddy bear. Suppose, however, that the parents lose track of their *child* in the mall. In that case, even a small chance of finding the child would justify continuing the search effort. Thus, when the stakes are high, even a very small probability of success can warrant preventive action. As an example of how costs might be relevant, Christian Baatz maintains that the level to which people should reduce their greenhouse gas emissions depends on how carbon dependent they are.³⁸

The scope of the prospect account is considerably larger than that of *SP*. Whereas *SP* requires that the agent be in a position to help prevent the harm, Prospect is met when the probability of her helping to prevent the harm is high enough. In other words, the agent’s contribution has to be pivotal in order for *SP*

37 How exactly they do so depends on the normative theory with which Prospect is combined. Here I remain neutral about this.

38 Baatz, “Climate Change and Individual Duties to Reduce GHG Emissions.”

to be met, whereas Prospect only requires that the risk that this is not the case is morally acceptable. In *Joyguzzlers*, no individual knows that by refraining from joyguzzling she will help prevent or mitigate a climate harm. However, it could be that she has adequate reason to believe that she might be. Similarly, when forming a human chain, an individual will rarely know whether her contribution is pivotal. This means that joining it is not required if *SP* is correct. However, the fact that it might be is sufficient for Prospect to be met.³⁹

Due to the thresholds that it features, Prospect supports what I call a “prospect range.” At one extreme lies the contribution of which an agent has adequate reason to believe that it makes the total probability that the harm be prevented high enough. From that point onward, any contribution will be required that increases that probability to a non-negligible and sufficient extent, as long as the agent also has adequate reason to believe that this is the case. However, at some point the additional increase that a contribution makes is too small to be worth the effort. The other extreme is formed by the contribution of which the agent has adequate reason to believe that this is the case.

But how does the prospect account answer *TQ*? And does it preserve the urgency intuition? As I discuss in section 4, an individual who has a preventive obligation ought to activate others if need be. The thing to appreciate is that the activation process influences the prospect of prevention. Consider a number of individuals who have successfully activated a few others. These in turn set out to mobilize yet other individuals. Now suppose that along the way it becomes likely that they will succeed in creating a critical mass of willing individuals. The prospect of success will then be good enough at some point during the activation process. Thus, at least in some cases, *PP* supports the following answer to *TQ*: individuals acquire a duty to take preventive action before the activation process has been completed.

This answer to *TQ* can be illuminated in terms of the following analogy. Suppose a baker has to make a wedding cake, but the wedding cake topper has not arrived yet. Because of this, she is not yet in a position to finish it. Even so, she might as well begin. She can add the topper once it arrives. This illustrates that people can sometimes have good reason to start a process that they cannot yet finish. Suppose, next, that the baker is on a tight schedule. If she does not start making the cake before the topper arrives, she will not be able to finish it in time. In this situation, the baker should start baking right away if she is to finish on time. This reveals that someone can be rationally required to start a process

39 The obligations that people might have in the human-chain example do not fall under the duty not to harm, which provides for the focus of this paper. Even so, *PP* can plausibly be taken to extend to it. However, a more detailed analysis of how and when it applies to the duty to benefit others must take into account that this is an imperfect duty.

before she is in a position to complete it. The arrival of the topper stands for the last member's joining the collective of the willing. Thus, the idea is that an individual can be morally required to take preventive action before enough people have been mobilized.

In these first two versions of the story, the baker has every reason to expect that the topper will arrive soon. Next consider a version in which the topper will in all likelihood be too late. The stakes for the baker are high. They include a profitable long-term arrangement that is conditional on the wedding cake being perfect, which means that it must feature a topper. Although she has little reason to expect success, the baker may still have enough reason to start baking the cake, hoping that the topper will arrive in time. This illustrates that, in order for it to be prudent for the baker to start baking the cake, the prospect of success has to be good enough. Furthermore, it reveals that what is good enough depends in part on what is at stake. I propose that, also in this respect, what is morally required is analogous to what is rationally required.⁴⁰

This supports the idea that what is required is not success but the prospect thereof. And the prospect of prevention can be good enough prior to the arrival of the "topper," that is, before the activation process has been completed. Thus, someone can be obligated to take preventive action already before enough others have been activated. To make this more precise, assume that the activation process is completed at t_2 . At that point, enough individuals have been mobilized to prevent the harm. As before, the individuals acquire the duty to activate at t_0 . If *SP* were correct, people would never become obligated to take preventive action before t_2 . I have argued, in effect, that the prospect to prevent the harm successfully can be good enough already at t_1 , after t_0 and before t_2 . This means that the prevention stage sometimes overlaps with the activation stage. Because of this difference, Prospect is to be preferred to *SP*.

The question that remains is how soon after the activation process has started an individual acquires a preventive obligation. The human chain example suggests that this could happen sooner rather than later, which would mean that the period between t_0 and t_1 is short. But there may be other cases in which it is long. Furthermore, in order to fully accommodate the urgency intuition, there must be cases in which people have preventive obligations already at t_0 . To determine whether this is possible, I go on to investigate the relation between activation and prevention.

40 This reveals that collective obligations depend on what is feasible (Hindriks, "The Problem of Insignificant Hands"). According to Wiens, what is feasible is a function of what is possible in the circumstances ("Political Ideals and the Feasibility Frontier"). This in turn is influenced by skills, resources, and (other) external conditions, including history (Jensen, "The Limits of Practical Possibility*").

4. ACTIVATION

When a harm is collective, obligations to prevent it are conditional. Their content is: to take preventive action if the prospect of success is high enough. As Goodin argues, someone who has a conditional obligation is thereby obligated to satisfy the condition.⁴¹ Now, activation can increase the prospect of prevention. It follows that someone who has a conditional preventive obligation may be obligated to activate others. For this to be the case, the prospect of activation must be good enough.⁴² The next thing to appreciate is that activation and prevention are not always independent processes. In order to be successful, an activator typically has to practice what she preaches. This insight forms the key to saving the urgency intuition, or so I argue in section 4.2. But first I explain in more detail what activating someone entails and how it is done (section 4.1). In section 4.3, I briefly discuss how the proposal generalizes to situations in which people have a temptation to freeride.⁴³

4.1. Signaling, Persuasion, and Moralization

To activate someone is to make it the case that he is willing to contribute to the cause, either unconditionally or conditionally. Three important ways of activating others are: signaling, persuasion, and moralization.⁴⁴ Signaling is, in this context, a matter of indicating that one is willing to take preventive action. People can do so, for instance, by signing an online petition, wearing a printed T-shirt, or boycotting an unethically produced product.⁴⁵ Because of its communicative function, a signal is meant to contribute to the satisfaction of the epistemic condition. It gives those who pick up on it reason to believe that more people are willing to contribute than they thought before. Now, it could be that, because of the signal, Prospect becomes satisfied, which means that the relevant individuals become obligated to take preventive action. Furthermore, a signal can also inspire others who did not want to contribute at first

41 Goodin, "Excused by the Unwillingness of Others?" 23.

42 This entails that, if the prospect of activation is not good enough, people will not even have conditional preventive obligations.

43 Young touches on similar issues when she discusses the idea that people can be obligated to form or join a collective ("Responsibility and Global Justice," and *Responsibility for Justice*). But she does not address the question of activation directly.

44 In principle, activation can also be done by means of manipulation or coercion. I set these possibilities aside here because they raise moral concerns of their own, which makes addressing them too complicated at this stage. For the same reason, I assume that activators are sincere when they communicate.

45 Lawford-Smith, "Unethical Consumption and Obligations to Signal," 322, 325.

to change their mind. For instance, a consumer boycott can gain momentum when more and more people learn about it. Thus, signaling can contribute to the satisfaction of the causal condition.

As I discuss at greater length elsewhere, activation can also proceed by means of persuasion.⁴⁶ This requires reaching out to someone and communicating with her. What is distinctive of persuasion is that the activator presents (apparent) pros and cons and engages with the person to be activated. The paradigmatic context of activation by persuasion is that of a mutually respectful conversation. One person talks to another and tries to get the other to support the cause. He attempts to convince, persuade, or entice her to do so. And he listens and responds when the other person objects. As I discuss shortly, it will often be important that the activator expresses his support for the cause in the process.

Finally, activation can also proceed by moralizing the activity that contributes to the harm. This serves to delegitimize it or make it less attractive in other ways. Think, for instance, of how eating meat and smoking have been or are being moralized.⁴⁷ The moralization process can involve signaling and persuasion. However, what is distinctive about it is that it involves creating a new norm. So-called first movers or norm entrepreneurs, who have a strong moral identity, take the initiative to do so.⁴⁸ They embrace a norm that proscribes the harmful activity. This means that they set an example and comply with it. Furthermore, they approve of those who do so as well and disapprove of those who do not. In these ways, individuals signal their support for the norm.⁴⁹ As just indicated, they might also try to convince others by means of arguments. Crucially, successful moralizers get others to adopt the norm too. They might become convinced by the arguments, or they might be concerned with what others think if they do not follow suit. A third option is that they simply discover that enough others are willing to do what it takes.

Communication plays an important role in activation. Signaling just is a matter of communicating willingness to take preventive action. And persuasion and moralization are often ineffective if the activator does not convey her willingness to do so.⁵⁰ But such willingness might be conditional. And this leaves

46 Hindriks, "The Duty to Join Forces."

47 Rozin, "The Process of Moralization."

48 Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, "Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action"; and Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*. For the notion of moral identity, see Aquino and Reed, "The Self-Importance of Moral Identity."

49 Cf. Lawford-Smith, "Unethical Consumption and Obligations to Signal," 323.

50 Also, people should advertise their willingness widely, if this is possible without too much effort. By doing so, they give more people adequate reason to believe that they should

open that prevention becomes obligatory only sometime after the activation process has started. I go on to argue, however, that people should often activate others by taking preventive action. And when this is the case, prevention is obligatory soon if not immediately.

4.2. *Activation by Means of Prevention*

Activation typically involves communication aimed at making someone willing to take preventive action, or so I have just argued. In order to be effective, such communication must be credible, or at least credible enough. And this typically requires that the activator practices what she preaches. Because of this, effective activation often involves preventive action. Consider Joyguzzlers once again. Imagine that you are at a party and someone tries to talk you out of driving a gas-guzzling car for fun. However, you just saw this person pulling up the driveway in an SUV. You point this out to him. And he responds by saying that he will stop driving his gas guzzler as soon as enough others have become willing to do so as well. You are not impressed, let alone convinced. And you find yourself another conversation partner.

The problem is not conceptual. It is in fact perfectly coherent for an activator to express conditional willingness. Instead, the problem is practical. As a matter of fact, attempts at mobilizing others tend to be more credible when the activator expresses an unconditional commitment or has already taken preventive action. Thus, the best way to get others to stop joyguzzling may well be to stop doing so yourself. This could at least be the first step of the activation process. In cases such as this one, you activate in part by means of taking preventive action. Presumably, doing so is required only as part of the activation process and not as a preventive action.

Cripps makes a similar point in relation to promotional actions.⁵¹ She considers situations in which taking preventive action is the best means to promoting a cause. And she argues that performing it is required only as a promotional action. In other words, it is at that point never required in its capacity of a preventive action. I disagree. Suppose that one of the joyguzzlers is a trendsetter. She knows that she has this status. And she realizes that when she changes her lifestyle, many people will follow suit. Because of her influence, she can activate many others simply by trading her gas-guzzling car for an electric car.⁵² This means that for her the prospects of activation are rather good.

contribute. Thus, it helps satisfy the epistemic condition for others.

51 Cripps, *Climate Change and the Moral Agent*, 144.

52 To make the example more realistic, it can be assumed that the idea of driving an electric car had already been gaining in popularity among her neighbors, perhaps because it is such a visible way of showing that you care about the environment.

Hence, the trendsetter is obligated to buy an electric car. She thereby activates others. However, it may be that the action is also required in its capacity of a preventive action. This will be the case if she has adequate reason to believe that it is sufficiently likely that by driving an electric car she can help prevent environmental harm. If this condition is indeed satisfied, she will be obligated to take preventive action from the start. And not just because it is the most effective means to getting others to support the cause, but also because of the effect it has on greenhouse emissions.

The human-chain example discussed in section 3.2 provides another illustration of this idea. Suppose that you approach some others and say that you will go into the water if they do so as well. In principle, you could wait for a few of them to get up before you take further action. You then start forming the human chain only once you have suitable reason to believe that enough people will join. However, you could also start running toward the water hoping that others will follow. This might actually be a rather effective way of engaging them. By running toward the water, you initiate preventive action. But you also activate others. Thus, your action plays two roles. And you might be obligated to perform it under both descriptions. To begin with, it is the most effective means to activating others. Suppose, however, that you have a sense that others will follow. Given that someone's life is at stake, this could mean that the prospect of success is good enough right from the start. If so, your running toward the water is also required in its guise as a preventive action.

Thus, preventive action can play an important role as part of the activation process. Nothing signals commitment more than enacting it. Such signaling can stand on its own or be part of a process of persuasion. And it often plays a significant role in moralization. Norm entrepreneurs are so committed to the cause that they will hardly violate the relevant norm, if at all.⁵³ They are not concerned with what others do. Furthermore, a moralizer is unlikely to be credible as an influencer if he does not practice what he preaches. If caught, he will be perceived as a hypocrite. Because of this, moralizers better comply with the norms they advocate.

However, often the prospect of prevention is not yet high enough. If so, then preventive action is required at best as a means to activation. But the prospect of moralization might not be high enough either. In that case, no one is obligated to do anything. Even so, this is unlikely to stop norm entrepreneurs.⁵⁴ They are convinced of their actions and tend to believe that they should act

53 Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*.

54 Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, "Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action"; and Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*.

irrespective of what others do. Strikingly, this means that the moralization process is frequently initiated by people who go above and beyond the call of duty. In other words, acts of moralization are often supererogatory. But irrespective of whether it is obligatory, effective moralization typically requires compliance, which presupposes unconditional willingness and entails preventive action.

The upshot is that the urgency intuition can be preserved. In section 4.1, I argued that preventive action is sometimes required *soon* after people acquire a duty to activate others. Here I conclude that preventive action is often required *immediately* (at t_0). In some cases, this is merely because it is an effective means to activation. In others it is also required as such. For this to be the case, the prospect of successful prevention must be good enough right from the start. Finally, sometimes activation and prevention are supererogatory rather than obligatory.

4.3. *Conflicts of Interests*

Thus far, I have abstracted from the temptation to freeride, which people might experience in the kind of situations at issue. Instead, I assumed that their interests align and that all they need to do is contribute to harm prevention in a coordinated fashion. However, people's interests often conflict.⁵⁵ This can be the case even when everybody supports the cause. Suppose, for instance, that more individuals are willing to contribute than needed for preventing the harm. This entails that if one or a few individuals were to refrain from contributing, the harm would still be prevented. In such a situation, many will want to be among the exceptions. Another possibility is that the costs of taking preventive action are so high that some are tempted not to contribute. These two cases illustrate that harm prevention can involve a conflict of interest. Resolving it requires people to cooperate.

A conflict of interest affects the prospect of success. People will, in all likelihood, be less inclined to believe that others will cooperate and take preventive action. Norms of cooperation can provide a solution to this problem. They can enable cooperation by changing people's motivation. Sanctions can make it less attractive to violate a norm. Furthermore, if a norm is regarded as legitimate, this can increase people's motivation to comply with it.⁵⁶ Finally, when a norm is well-established, expectations about compliance will be in place and provide individuals with the requisite assurance. In these ways, a norm can even increase the prospect of success. Thus, norms do not only serve to convince

55 Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*; and Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons."

56 Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society*; and Hindriks, "Norms that Make a Difference."

people that engaging in a particular activity is wrong but they can also motivate them to comply in spite of a temptation to freeride on the efforts of others.⁵⁷

5. CONCLUSION

So, *when should we start saving the planet?* Given the seriousness of climate harms, there is no time to waste. The main virtue of the prospect account I have proposed here is that it does justice to this sense of urgency. It entails that we should indeed start saving the planet *soon, if not immediately*. Strikingly, one of its rivals, which revolves around HP, implies that collective harms never obligate. The reason for this is that it insists on individual control (section 2). In contrast, both SP and PP do support collective obligations. They only require that an individual can help prevent it (section 3).

The main challenge that these two views face concerns situations in which too few individuals are willing to take preventive action. I have argued that people can be obligated to activate others by signaling their willingness to them, by persuading them, or by moralizing the harmful activity. According to PP, people have activation obligations if the prospect of success is good enough (section 3.2). SP fails to account for such obligations because it takes them to be constituted by mutual commitments. Such commitments will be in place only after the activation process has been completed (section 3.1).⁵⁸

This has consequences for the time at which preventive action is required. As SP requires success, this is the case only once a critical mass of individuals is willing to take preventive action. This entails that the activation process and prevention process are temporally distinct. However, the prospect of success

57 When some fail to cooperate, the prospect account can require people to take up the slack (see also Collins, *Group Duties*, 119). This conflicts with the fair-shares view of obligations, according to which an individual ought to do only that which would prevent the harm if everybody did it (Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*). The fair-shares view also implies that people cannot have a duty to activate others. It would be unfair to require someone to put effort into getting someone else to do what she should do anyway, as this would require them to do more than their fair share. For critiques of the fair-shares view, see Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons"; Baatz, "Climate Change and Individual Duties to Reduce GHG Emissions"; and Karnstein, "Putting Fairness in Its Place."

58 Instead of a constitutive role, commitments play an instrumental role in the prospect account. First, someone who is committed to performing a particular action is more likely to do so, other things being equal (Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*). Second, someone who expresses this commitment thereby provides someone else a (defeasible) reason to believe that they will perform the action. Third, expressing a commitment can be conducive to activating others. Finally, commitments to norms play a central role in the moralization process, in particular when interests conflict.

can be good enough much earlier. In fact, activation and prevention can and should often go hand in hand. In such cases, people are obligated to take preventive action soon, if not immediately. It follows that only PP accounts for the urgency intuition (section 4.2).

A distinctive feature of PP is that it includes normative thresholds. Their height depends on the moral significance of the pending harm and on the burden that taking preventive action places on individuals (section 3.2). It follows that people will not have preventive obligations when the harm is small and the burden is large. Furthermore, it entails that even a rather small probability of success can be high enough to support such obligations if the harm is rather large, as in the case of climate change.

But how many individuals are obligated to take preventive action? Three salient answers are: no one, everyone, and exactly the number of individuals needed for averting the harm. If PP is correct, all of these answers are mistaken. Instead, this number depends on the circumstances. Suppose that some number of individuals is obligated to take preventive action. It may be that the prospect of success would still be good enough if circumstances change such that fewer individuals are in a position to take such action, or more for that matter (section 3.2). Thus, there is a prospect range within which individuals are required to contribute.⁵⁹

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