

Säde Hormio¹

Droplets of Detriment and Pint-Sized Profits: Small Contributions to Collective Outcomes²

Moral theories struggle to give a reason why individuals should or should not contribute to a collective outcome when the contribution is small enough to make no relevant difference to it. This is problematic if most contributions that make up a normatively important outcome share this feature. Although the literature on the problem of small contributions has focused on momentary token choice situations, I will argue that the central question should instead be individual behaviour over time and contributions to certain types of outcomes. Because most real-life cases are about collective outcomes that aggregate over time, the crucial question is not about contributions to a harm (or failing to help) on some specific one-off occasion. Instead, what matters more is if we regularly perform, or try to avoid, that type of contribution. I argue that in many cases, the correct unit of moral analysis is not the individual act, but the coherence of the moral life of a person. Failing to act according to our individual values in collective settings compromises our integrity as moral agents. If one attempts to separate the individual and the collective domains starkly in moral matters, it can lead to a lack of coherence between one's values and contributions.

¹ Practical Philosophy, University of Helsinki & Institute for Futures Studies, Stockholm (sade.hormio@helsinki.fi)

² Financial support from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (grant no. P22-0662) is gratefully acknowledged.

1. Introduction

Individual contributions to collectively caused outcomes can sometimes be very small, even so tiny as to make no relevant difference. Yet, in aggregate, these small contributions can result in a morally significant outcome, whether good or bad. Moral theories struggle to explain why individuals should make or withhold such contributions, which is problematic, as many global ills today are best described as small contributions to a great harm (Kutz 2000; Lichtenberg 2014; Nefsky 2019). Some prominent examples discussed in the literature include microplastics found in the oceans, greenhouse gases emitted around the world accumulating in the atmosphere to cause climate change, or customers buying products made with sweatshop labour. It seems that we want to give individuals a reason not to make these contributions, because if no contributor feels that they should act differently, there is a danger that tackling many modern harms will appear to be the responsibility of no one. Of course, there are usually collective agents who bear responsibility: the manufacturer of plastic bottles, the retailer of overly cheap clothing, or the fossil fuel industry digging up more coal, oil, and gas. There are also collective agents that potentially have extensive power to change practices, including nation-states, international regulators, or investors. Even so, it is not clear that so-called ‘responsibility gaps’ would not appear: the actions of collective agents might not account for the entirety of the harm, or the collective agents might not have the tools and power to fix the whole problem by themselves (Collins 2019).³

When a collectively caused outcome is morally significant, it should give individuals a reason to contribute to it, or to refrain from doing so, but if the contributions make no difference, it seems hard to pinpoint what that normative reason is.⁴ I will call this the *Problem of Small Contributions*. The problem can be discussed in terms of what moral reasons are there for (not) performing acts of a certain type (such as buying clothes made in sweatshops), or what moral reasons are there for (not) performing some particular token act (like buying a dress from an online retailer known for using sweatshops during their promotional campaign to get new customers). I will label these *Type Problem of Small Contributions*, and *Token Problem of Small Contributions*, respectively. The former is easier to solve.

There is an ongoing debate among philosophers about the normative significance

³ There might also be motivational gaps in getting collective agents to change their course of action without individuals insisting that they do so. There are also cases in which the harm is caused by widespread harmful practices and structures that are outside the full control of even powerful collective agents (think of ingrained racism in a society).

⁴ I assume, uncontroversially, that people are motivated to do something that they judge to be the right thing, without taking sides in the debates over the exact link between moral motivation and judgement, or on the strength of the motivation.

of very small contributions (e.g. Asker 2023; Barnett 2018; Broome 2019; Budolfson 2019; Kagan 2011; Kutz 2000; Nefsky 2017; Spiekermann 2014). Some argue that all small contributions to great harms are also harmful by themselves. Others disagree and argue that small contributions become harms only when combined with enough other such contributions, a position that could be labelled as *harmless in isolation*. Although not taking sides in that debate, I will argue that we should care about individual contributions even if they are harmless in isolation and make no difference to an outcome by themselves. There might not always be a reason for (not) performing a particular act on a given occasion (i.e. the *Token Problem* persists), but we can have a moral *pro tanto* reason we should or should not perform certain types of acts (offering a solution to the *Type Problem*).⁵

Although the literature so far has focused on the *Token Problem of Small Contributions*, that is, on momentary choice situations, I will argue that more attention should be paid to the *Type Problem of Small Contributions*. The emphasis thus should be on individual behaviour over time. After all, moral reasons for individual actions not only stem from what the individual can do in terms of affecting the outcome, but also from concerns about what kind of person one should be, and how one should not associate oneself with wrongness. If you overlook the effects that the collectives you belong to have on the world, this can have a corrupting effect on your character. (Such an attitude could also have a corroding effect on communities and societies when widely shared, but here I will focus on the individual). However, the account I propose is not fixated on clean hands and perfect character. Rather, it is about not discounting the collective contexts within which we act.

I suggest that we should care about our marginal contributions as tokens of harmful or beneficial patterns, even when not every instance counts. The focus is thus on contributions to types of collective harms or benefits, rather than on a particular token. This is because most of the real-life cases that display the structure of the *Problem of Small Contributions* are about harms that aggregate over time (like greenhouse gas emissions, plastic waste accumulating in the oceans, the economic structures that make sweatshops viable, and so on), and not one-off situations. The same goes for many collective cases of benefit: they only come about if enough contribute over time, like is the case with donations to most charities, for example. For this reason, the crucial question in most real-life cases is not if we contribute to a harm or fail to help on some specific occasion (token), but if we regularly try to avoid or perform that type of contribution (type).

I begin by highlighting the key features of the Problem of Small Contributions

⁵ Pro tanto reasons are important reasons that should be taken seriously, but which can be outweighed by other reasons all things considered, depending on the circumstances.

through two examples. Then I discuss the limits of solutions based solely on aggregate of individual effects in section three by distinguishing what those explanations must assume in order to work. These features are not present in all examples of small contributions to collectively caused outcomes. In section four, I argue for the importance of a coherent moral life of a person and how it is the correct unit of moral analysis instead of isolated individual acts, and hence the evaluative stance we should take. I also defend my integrity approach from objections.

2. Box of Doom and Rice Grains

This section highlights the key features of the Problem of Small Contributions to collectively caused outcomes through two examples, one towards a harm, the other towards a beneficial outcome. The latter cases are discussed less often in the literature, but I find them to be equally important, as omitting to make a small contribution to beneficial causes can translate into missed opportunities to make things better, or it can help to maintain a detrimental status quo. But let us start off with the harm or, more precisely, the *Box of Doom*.

Box of Doom

There is an island with 10,000 inhabitants and a Box of Doom. The Box was brought to the island a few hundred years ago by a mad scientist, who wired all the 1,000 wells on the island to connect to the Box. Each time someone pumps water from a well, a vent opens up that allows natural gas to flow into the Box. Nothing happens, as the container is very large, and the gas slowly evaporates from little holes at the top. The islanders know about the Box of Doom and have made estimates about the rate of evaporation and how much gas it can safely contain. However, if the islanders pump water over a certain level in any given year, gas starts accumulating in the Box. If enough gas builds up, it leads to an explosion after a few years. The results could be potentially catastrophic for the island. This is why each islander is aware of a safe amount to pump per year. The amount of water is enough to cover basic needs, although being able to pump more would certainly make life easier.

The key elements of the Problem of Small Contributions to a normatively significant outcome are included in the example. Firstly, individual acts do not cause the harmful outcome in isolation, but only in association with enough other such acts. In other words, they are harmless or non-impactful in isolation. As individual acts in isolation do not set off the explosion, they cause no harm as such, although they can increase the risk of harm. (Arguably, the psychological effect of the latter could be harmful.

Still, they do not cause material harm in isolation.⁶) Secondly, unilateral action is not enough to avoid the harm. There is no off-switch on the Box that someone could just flick and be done with the threat. Thirdly, the harm is not intended as such, but rather it is a side effect of some other activity. In this, the example is similar to many real-life environmental harms, like microplastics accumulating in the oceans. This is not a necessary feature of the Problem of Small Contributions, but it is often present.

Another thing to note about the example is that the explosion in the *Box of Doom* is a threshold harm, which can take many forms. In this case, there is no explosion if the yearly thresholds are not exceeded, because the gas steadily evaporates from the holes at the top. The threshold is thus met or unmet on a rolling basis. There can also be cases in which the small contributions steadily accumulate over time, so that the harm becomes more and more likely with each contribution, or there might be many thresholds.

Next, let us look at small contributions to a positive outcome.

Rice Grains

A village with 100 residents hosts a weekly party, to which they invite people from nearby villages. The neighbouring villages are less well-off, and the weekly gatherings help them to prevent malnutrition. The tradition is to serve risotto at the party, so a large pan is set up, in which risotto is cooked from rice donated by the residents. As decided by the village council (of which all residents are members), each resident is supposed to donate one cup of risotto rice each week, which equals roughly 5,000 grains. The risotto therefore has approximately 500,000 grains of rice in it. Experience has taught the villagers that this is a good size because all partygoers get enough to eat. This is also the surplus amount that each villager can donate without their own families going hungry.

As before, the outcome is brought about only if enough people contribute to it. Individual donations will only make the party risotto possible if there are enough other such donations. Furthermore, unilateral action is not enough: no villager has enough rice to make the risotto happen on their own. In the same way, an individual unilaterally opting out will not jeopardise the outcome: a risotto with 495,000 grains will still feed all the partygoers. Individual small contributions are non-impactful in isolation.

A difference with regard to the harm example is that the risotto is an intended outcome of the small contributions, not a side effect of some other activity. Another difference is that while the explosion was purely a threshold outcome, under or above

⁶ Pumping over the limit might cause anxiety or stress among islanders who know about the activity. However, for the sake of simplicity, I will focus on material harm or a risk of such harm.

which individual acts do not have an impact, in *Rice Grains* there is a range for the ideal number of contributions, but no clear threshold for when the heap of rice becomes the party risotto. Individual acts over and above the range of the ideal number of contributions still have an impact, although the outcome might be sub-optimal (there is not enough food to feed all, or there is too much food, resulting in waste). Despite these differences, in both examples, a unilateral withdrawal of one's small contribution will not change the outcome for the better or the worse: there will still be enough risotto for everyone, even if Rosa does not donate, and there might be an explosion even if Riko never pumps water over the limit. These actions are non-impactful in isolation (i.e. if only one person acts in that way, the collective outcome does not come about), but if enough people cooperate with the safety limits, there will be no explosion, and if enough people do not contribute, there would not be enough risotto. What others do matters.

The configuration of real-life small contributions to collectively caused outcomes might of course bear little resemblance to such invented examples. There might be no thresholds at all, just a steady accumulation of harm or benefit. One's small contribution could also have an impact many times over, as with anthropogenic climate change. While there has been a lot of debate over the effects of individual emissions (e.g. Cripps 2016; Sandberg 2011; Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong 2018), climate change is not the best example of the Problem of Small Contributions. This is because while individual emitting choices, such as Sunday joyrides with gas-guzzling cars, are small contributions to a great harm, they lack the central feature of being non-impactful in isolation. An individual's emissions have countless opportunities to cause harm over the decades and centuries that they spend in the atmosphere (Broome 2019). However, not all small emissions contributions are borne out of such direct choices as deciding to go on a Sunday joyride (more on this in the next section). Therefore, the Problem of Small Contributions returns.

3. Direct Small Effects and Direct Small Choices

Examples of small contributions usually assume what I will call a *direct small choice*: the agent has a choice that is entirely up to them, albeit without control over the collective outcome. They often also assume a *direct small effect*: the agent's action has an effect, even if this is imperceptible in isolation from other such acts. Yet these features are not always present in real-life instances of the problem of small contributions.

In Derek Parfit's (1987: 80–81) famous case of a mistake in moral mathematics, *The Harmless Torturers*, a thousand torturers each turns a dial that distributes a minuscule amount of pain to a thousand victims. Although no single torturer can be said

to have made their pain worse, each victim is in severe pain as they are being tortured by a thousand people. Each small contribution to the torture has a direct small effect, albeit imperceptible. The individual torturers cannot – in isolation – decide if the person is being tortured or not, or the level of pain that the victim is under. However, they have a direct small choice: it is up to them if they turn the dial or not. *Rice Grains* also has these features: each individual can decide to contribute their cup, or not, in isolation from the other decisions (direct small choice) and as a result of this decision, there is either one cup more or one cup less in the risotto (direct small effect). Although your contribution might not be perceptible or significant, and you have no direct control over the outcome, you still have some direct small room for manoeuvre.

While an individual turning the dial results in too small a difference in pain for the victim to notice, each torturer has turned the dial a thousand times. They should care because of the aggregate impacts can amount to a great harm. However, this approach works only in cases when the agent is repeatedly contributing to some outcome via direct small choices through actions which have direct small effects. But not all cases of small contributions to collective outcomes have such features. When the available infrastructure offers no real options, an average individual has no direct small choice (apart from trying to influence others). Consider contributions to environmental pollution. You can take the metro to work instead of driving your car, only if an efficient enough public transportation system is available. The same goes for the type of energy infrastructure that powers the public spaces you use (Hormio 2024: 7–8). In such cases, there is no direct small choice in isolation from others (or if there is, it is unfeasibly prohibitive: drive your car to work or quit). Compare this with the *Box of Doom*, in which each individual chooses if they abide by the water restrictions, even though they have no control over the collective outcome.

The causal impact of small contributions has been emphasised in the literature by looking at the aggregate impact made by each agent over a period of time, or at the aggregate impact on a beneficiary or victim. This is where the moral mathematics comes in: you should consider the collective setting. Although the electric shock caused by turning the dial is too small to notice, taken as a set, the torturers inflict great suffering on their thousand victims (Parfit 1987). There is an epistemic dimension to the argument about sets. In the *Box of Doom*, the individual rule-breakers do not know how many others are pumping over the limit. They are behaving in a way that would cause harm if enough other people behaved like them, but their actions do not cause material harm because there are only 70 of them (let us assume this is 20 islanders short of a 90-person-harm-causing set). Regardless of this, it is wrong for them to act this way, as they do not know what others are doing: the set they are part of could be large enough to cause an explosion. Individual contributors do wrong if they ignore the risk that their actions may become perceivable depending on what

others do (Spiekermann 2014: 89), and we should not ignore such risk because we cannot be sure what others will do. Or, as Julia Nefsky (2017) argues, we should not decide in advance that our individual action is insignificant when an outcome is uncertain.⁷

However, if you have perfect knowledge of a situation, an individual act that is harmless in isolation seems permissible if you are certain of what others do. It would be fine to pump over the limit if you have installed security cameras at all the pumps and know that enough others are complying with the restrictions. It is equally fine to turn the dial if you know for certain that your contribution will not be perceptible due to what others have done. It is unsatisfactory to have an account with such limitations, especially since it seems to allow for cases that go against our moral intuitions about how we should treat each other.

Indeed, there seems to be something strange about wondering if our individual small contribution is harmful when such activity in general causes harm. How many of us would be comfortable about being friends with harmless torturers? Surely there is something amiss in your character if you think that while torture is bad, it is acceptable for you to torture just a tiny bit, as you or someone else has calculated that it makes no difference to the suffering of the victim. It is like saying that although I do not believe in animal cruelty, because a kitten is already sure to drown in a bucket, I might as well add some more water into it. I find the cases with more bite to be the ones in which the activity is not arguably harmful already by definition (like torturing someone). These are cases like the *Box of Doom*, when you are pumping water to meet food and hygiene needs better, not to kill kittens.

4. Coherence of the Moral Life of a Person

Although we can focus on individual acts and analyse them, their normative significance can often only be evaluated by looking at the coherence of the moral life of a person, or so I suggest in this section. Although the problem of small contributions is usually framed in terms of how individual actions are instrumental to morally significant outcomes, I argue that what matters more is the issue of the individual's moral character and that potential solutions should focus on this instead. I explain what I understand by coherence and integrity, as well as discuss how contributing to a collective outcome should be conceptualised. I will also quickly note how my suggestion differs from the version of an integrity account that is said to suffer from the superfluity problem (Nefsky 2019; Wieland & van Oeveren 2020). But to begin, I start

⁷ She distinguishes between making a difference and helping to bring something about (Nefsky 2017).

by explaining the morally evaluative stance that I think is often the most relevant when looking at collective impact cases.

We should consider whether an action in a collective context is something that we want to do, not only because of the possible impact of the *horizontal accumulation* (i.e. that it belongs to a set of acts that in aggregate cause harm or benefit), but also the impacts of *vertical accumulation on one's character*, to use my own terms. By choosing to use the words 'horizontal' and 'vertical' in this context, I want to draw attention to how these are different and independent dimensions of accumulation of small impacts into something normatively significant.

Think of each contribution as a dot. In horizontal accumulation, the dots are spread widely over many points, because the collective outcome is an aggregate of contributions by several people. This is how small contributions are usually described in the literature. In contrast, I use the term 'vertical' to highlight how the accumulation can also be framed from the point of view of one person (dots piled on top of one another). But instead of focusing on the aggregate causal impact of such vertical accumulation of one person's choices over a period of time (e.g. Broome 2012; Nolt 2011), I want to focus on the impact of the accumulation on the people themselves.

My argument is that such a vertical evaluative stance, focused on the coherence of the moral life of a person, can give us a reason to make or refrain from making small contributions. Reasons of character can make us rethink our contribution to a collective outcome, even if we are certain that our individual acts are harmless or create no benefits in isolation in a given instant. This has a lot in common with Bernard Williams' (1981) argument about integrity: we should not be fragmented agents, but internally coherent. We might often fail, but overall, we should aim to live our lives in a way that corresponds with our values, and this includes what we are involved in as members or constituents of collectives. The idea is not to aim for some moral sainthood, or to fret over every dot in the picture, but to look at the patterns instead. Such patterns certainly form over months and years, but the relevant period of evaluation will vary. Although the literature on the problem of small contributions has focused on momentary choice situations, I am arguing that the central question should instead be individual behaviour over time.

By bringing up integrity, I wish to refer to the idea that we should not discount the effects that we bring about together when we think about how we should live our lives. Marion Hourdequin (2010) describes moral integrity as an obligation to avoid hypocrisy by accepting some level of personal obligation to try to fulfil a collective obligation one has accepted. After all, human psychology does not lend itself to stark separation between personal and political obligations, the individual and the collective. Although the exact concept of integrity is difficult to pin down, it includes both internalisation of certain commitments and unity among these commitments,

in other words, ‘integrality’ and ‘integration’ (Audi & Murphy 2006; Hourdequin 2010). I do not aim to offer reasons for caring about something for those people who in general do not care about it.⁸ The point I want to make here is simple: that by discounting the collective outcomes we are contributing to, we could be letting go of some of our commitments as individuals. If one attempts to separate the individual and the collective domains starkly in moral matters, it can lead to a lack of coherence between one’s values and contributions. Any blunt separation is an illusion. Such lack of coherence can also be harmful for the person’s character.

While our everyday small choices affect the coherence of our moral lives, I do not aim to present an account that comes straightforwardly under virtue ethics. While the torturers could easily be covered by such an account – their willingness to play a part in torture pointing to cruelty or indifference to the suffering of others – it is harder to find such obvious character flaws in the more mundane small contributions to collectively-caused harms, especially when their roots are in structures. However, while character-based reasons are not the whole story, they are still an important part of the integrity account that I am proposing. If we willingly contribute to harm daily, however imperceptibly, we could become numb to the problem. Not caring enough can become part of your moral narrative if you start regarding such participation as morally fine, when in reality you are prepared to be part of a set of people who could blow up an island together.

The appeal is not to the aggregate impacts made by an agent over a period of time, but to the aggregate impact *on the agents themselves*: the corroding and corrupting effect on our characters if we fail to properly consider the impacts of the collective outcomes we contribute to. In time, such numbness to a problem can also contribute to creating harmful social norms around the issue, which can help to create the shared illusion that what we are doing together is at least acceptable, if not fine, even if the collective outcome is harmful.

With small contributions to collectively caused outcomes, it can be unclear what ‘contributing’ refers to, if it does not necessarily have a causal effect. The answer will depend on the kind of collective that is in question, that is, if the collective outcome is due to organised collective action or looser collective patterns of behaviour. To use *The Harmless Torturers* to illustrate the difference, the small contributions could be

⁸ One might ask: what about those who don’t have the relevant values? If I do not value the well-being of other people, or care about non-human nature, and I do not consider these when making decisions, then why should I care about the collective level features of my actions? The argument offered here does not seek to offer an overarching account of *why* we should care about small contributions. Its ambition is limited to trying to show that *if* we care about other people or nature more generally, *then* it is incoherent to not to also care about our small contributions to harms or good outcomes. This holds at the level of types of acts, but not with every token.

made in a setting of organised action (individuals who work for The Harmless Torturers Ltd.) or as a result of looser collective patterns of behaviour (e.g. the individuals are following some bizarre social norms).⁹ In this article my focus is on organised collective action, whether by collective agents or more informal groups, but I have written about small contributions as part of looser collective patterns elsewhere (Hormio 2024: 91–97).

One example of an organised collective is the village council in *Rice Grains*. Christopher Kutz's (2000) notion of a *participatory intention* offers a simple and effective way of conceptualising collective action and helps in thinking through our individual responsibility as members of collective agents. We share a goal that teleologically explains our actions when our participatory intentions overlap (and we are sufficiently aware of this). That is, they are not explained in causal terms, but in terms of the purpose they serve. The villagers donate a cup of rice each to make the party risotto, because the village council has decided to help feed the neighbouring villagers with a weekly feast. In causal terms, one donated cup does not make or break the collective goal of serving the party risotto, but it can nevertheless be conceptualised as contributing to it, because the purpose the donation serves is to be a gift towards the risotto. Participatory intention is made up of a *collective end* (the object of a description that is constituted by the acts of many individuals), and the *individual role* (action an individual performs to promote a collective end) (Kutz 2000: 81). In *Rice Grains*, the collective end is the party risotto, and the individual role is to donate a cup of rice to it.

Individuals do not need to intend the collective end, as long as they interpret themselves as *contributing* to it. This account of joint action is more minimalistic than many other accounts, as it does not require a collective commitment, only an acceptance of collective norms.¹⁰ We often act together under only a vague description of what we intentionally promote together (Kutz 2000: 155). Some of the villagers in *Rice Grains* might only contribute their cup of rice because their neighbours do, without any intention as such to feed people from neighbouring villages. Because participatory intentions need only sufficiently overlap (“contribute to the risotto”), the members do not have to intend every action that is performed for the collective end to count as members.¹¹

⁹ My interpretation is that the individuals are employed to be torturers or are otherwise members of an organised torturing collective. But if the dial was in a park with only an instruction note attached to it, with random people turning the dial, it would still be callous to do so. You would allow yourself to be involved in easily avoidable collective harm.

¹⁰ Collective norms can be understood either as social norms particular to some collective, like an organisation or an association, or as behavioural regularities within the wider collective environment.

¹¹ Note that this does not rule out unintended collective consequences, but simply means that participatory intentions are directed at a goal that is intended. What we tolerate, desire, and value links us to the collective outcome. When it comes to accountability for collective action, the *basis* is individualistic (your participatory

One concern is that we need a reason to act (or refrain from acting) that connects appropriately to the collectively produced benefit or harm. A donation expresses support for the weekly feast and solidarity with fellow villagers, without having to make calculations about the expected utility of the contribution. On this broader conception of contributing, we can no longer explain why we should take one specific action rather than another (Nefsky 2015). If my action is not expected to make an actual difference to the outcome, but is meant mostly to express support and solidarity, then why not do something symbolic only? Since 99 cups of rice make enough risotto to feed all the partygoers, why should I contribute a cup instead of, say, singing about the virtues of donating rice? The problem, of course, is that if everyone thought like this when individual contributions are small, nothing significant would ever be achieved.

The answer to this lies in separating two worries: can an account tell us why we should take one specific action rather than another at a given instant, and can it explain why we should take that type of action in most cases? While there can be a reason to make or refrain from an action of a certain type, my account does not purport to be action-guiding in a choice situation, as it does not apply to all tokens of a type of action. I aim to give only a pro tanto reason; the all-things-considered reason depends on the circumstances. It might not even make sense to ask questions about contributions in all individual instances, and it probably does not matter what a given villager or islander does on a given day. My suggestion is that our evaluative focus should instead be on the patterns that our actions form.

Imagine a villager in *Rice Grains*, who often sings about the merits of contributing to the risotto, but week after week, fails to give anything. In my account, what matters is the narrative that forms over time. Or imagine an islander who displays posters outside their house about the importance of keeping an eye on water consumption but neglects to vote for the installation of water saving taps in nearby public amenities. In this case, an opportunity to make a difference is not taken. Symbolic ways can count as contributions sometimes, and can replace more concrete ways to contribute, but only as long as they are balanced by other acts as well. As the focus on the coherence of the moral life of a person is about the big picture, symbolic reasons of character matter alongside collective consequences.¹²

intention), but the *object* is collective (the outcome of collective action) (Kutz 2000: 115–116). Therefore, even if you do not intend to contribute to a collective harm, you can still be accountable for the bad outcome if you do not revise or question your participation.

¹² I should make it clear that my concern with character is not about trying to attain as clean hands as possible. Not only would that probably involve being somewhat of a hermit in the modern, interdependent world, but it would certainly result in lost opportunities to be part of a change for the better. My concern is rather that if we discount the results of the collective action that we contribute to, we are paying insufficient attention to a large part of our moral lives.

The idea of the coherence of the moral life of a person includes what we do and intend to do with others, and what we owe to them due to this. This does not mean that the only way to participate is through donating the rice. There might be weeks when singing or some other such expressive act makes sense. But if many others start also singing instead of donating their cups, the situation changes. When participating in collective action, one should always have their feelers out for changes in the collective context (Hormio 2024: 84).

Sometimes there are options to not contribute. Say that the islanders have dug new wells that are not connected to the Box of Doom. Unfortunately, the mad scientist dug her wells in places with the best groundwater reservoirs, so the new wells draw from more confined and unsaturated aquifers, with the result that the islanders must pump much harder to obtain water. They prefer using the old wells because they deliver more water with less work. Still, the new wells provide the islanders with an option to opt out of being part of the problem, albeit at a personal cost. This version of the *Box of Doom* resembles many purchasing choices in the real world.

The coherence of the moral life of a person does not usually stand or fall due to individual acts in certain time slices, as it is about the bigger picture and patterns.¹³ In other words, an overly individualistic conception of one's footprint in the world is at odds with the interdependent reality of our moral lives as social beings engaged in multiple levels of (obvious and less-than-obvious) cooperation each day. Not applying the values we hold as individuals to our behaviour in collective contexts is incoherent, and in the long run, detrimental to the way we organise our lives together.

5. Conclusion

Sometimes the correct unit of moral analysis is not an individual act, but the coherence of the moral life of a person. Small contributions to a harm or to a good outcome matter if they are contributions to a normatively significant outcome, regardless of whether we can tease out any causal difference through a direct small choice or a direct small effect. Some contributions to collective outcomes operate under collective level structures that limit or pre-describe individual acts in such a way that there is no direct small choice or effect. To explain why individuals still have a pro tanto moral reason to make or withhold their contributions, the evaluation must encompass more than just the aggregate causal impact.

¹³ If you have seen that the social norm around participation is robust, and that contributions are made week after week, it is not incoherent to contribute sometimes to the collective end in some way other than by donating your cup: you can be fairly certain that the collective goal is achieved regardless. Still, such alternative ways of contributing must always be made with the view of the collective context, i.e. the agent must monitor the collective context and stay alert to possible changes.

Although the focus has been on the impact of small contributions to an individual character, the goal is not to have scrupulously clean hands and perfect character. Rather, the goal is to become aware of oneself as enmeshed in several collective webs, an individual who is socially situated in an interdependent world. In other words, to drop an overly individualistic way of conceptualising the effects of one's actions. In collective harm cases, our evaluative focus should be on the patterns that our actions form with other such acts in a collective setting. Moral theorising should not try to isolate individual effects and agents in cases in which it does not make sense.

Our contributions, however small they might be, are part of our moral narrative. The collective goals we promote should be coherent with our values. Caring about small contributions forms part of a coherent moral life.¹⁴

References

- Asker, A. S. (2023). The problem of collective impact: why helping doesn't do the trick. *Philosophical Studies*, 180, 2377–2397.
- Audi, R. & Murphy, P. E. (2006). The Many Faces of Integrity. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 16, 3–21.
- Barnett, Z. (2018). No free lunch: The significance of tiny contributions. *Analysis*, 78(1), 3–13.
- Broome, J. (2012). *Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World*. W. W. Norton.
- Broome, J. (2019). Against Denialism. *Monist*, 102(1), 110–129.
- Budolfson, M. B. (2019). The inefficacy objection to consequentialism and the problem with the expected consequences response. *Philosophical Studies*, 176, 1711–1724.
- Collins, S. (2019). Collective Responsibility Gaps. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 154, 943–954.
- Cripps, E. (2016). On Climate Matters: Offsetting, Population, and Justice. *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, 40, 114–128.
- Hormio, S. (2024). *Taking Responsibility for Climate Change*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hourdequin, M. (2010). Climate, Collective Action and Individual Ethical Obligations. *Environmental Values*, 19, 443–464.

¹⁴ I would like to thank Andrea Asker Svedberg and the workshop participants for very helpful comments.

- Kagan, S. (2011). Do I Make a Difference?. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 39(2), 105–141.
- Kingston, E. & Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2018). What’s Wrong with Joyguzzling?. *Ethical Theory & Moral Practise*, 21, 169–186.
- Kutz, C. (2000). *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lichtenberg, J. (2014). *Distant Strangers: Ethics, Psychology, and Global Poverty*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nefsky, J. (2015). Fairness, Participation, and the Real Problem of Collective Harm. In M. C. Timmons (Ed.), *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics, Volume 5* (pp. 245–271). Oxford University Press.
- Nefsky, J. (2017). How you can help, without making a difference. *Philosophical Studies*, 174(11), 2743–2767.
- Nefsky, J. (2019). Collective harm and the inefficacy problem. *Philosophy Compass*. 14:e12587.
- Nolt, J. (2011). How Harmful Are the Average American’s Greenhouse Gas Emissions? *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 14(1), 3–10.
- Parfit, D. (1987). *Reasons and Persons* [reprint with corrections]. Clarendon Press.
- Sandberg, J. (2011). ‘My Emissions Make No Difference’: Climate Change and the Argument from Inconsequentialism. *Environmental Ethics*, 33(3), 229–248.
- Spiekermann, K. (2014) Small Impacts and Imperceptible Effects: Causing Harm with Others. *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, 38, 75–90.
- Wieland, J. W. & van Oeveren, R. (2020). Participation and Superfluity. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 17, 163–187.
- Williams, B. (1981). *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge University Press.