

APPLIED BENEFICENCE

Is It All For Nothing? On the Futility Objection to Individual Environmental and Political Action

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INTRODUCTION

Swapping your gas-guzzling SUV for an electric car will not make a difference to the overall state of the environment. Since our individual efforts to combat climate change are usually futile, a number of philosophers have suggested that we have no duty to cut our emissions; instead, we have a duty to promote effective environmental policy. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues that acting on an individual level “does little or nothing to stop global warming, nor does this focus fulfill our real moral obligations, which are to get governments to do their job to prevent the disaster of excessive global warming. It is better to enjoy your Sunday driving

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while working to change the law so as to make it illegal for you to enjoy your Sunday driving.”¹ Mark Budolfson writes, “individuals are not required to *reduce emissions*, although individuals are required to *favor effective public policy solutions to climate change*.”² Along similar lines, John Broome says,

[t]he needed reductions will not be achieved by the private initiatives of each of us; it will be achieved by governments using their powers of coercion over us, including their power to regulate and their power to tax. By these means, they can induce all of us together to reduce our emissions. Reductions on the required scale cannot be achieved in any other way.³

My argument in this paper is straightforward: we can’t have it both ways. Individual political action is typically as futile as individual environmental action. If the futility objection undermines an individual obligation to reduce emissions, then it undermines an individual obligation to promote effective environmental policy.

The paper starts by sketching Sinnott-Armstrong’s and Budolfson’s versions of the futility objection to the view that individuals have a duty to reduce emissions (Section I). Although they differ in their details, both arguments rest on the claim that an individual’s contribution to cleaner air is inconsequential. Next, I argue that an individual’s contribution to better environmental policy is inconsequential as well (Section II). Thus, the reasons that Sinnott-Armstrong and Budolfson take to undermine support for an individual moral obligation to contribute to cleaner air also undermine support for an individual moral obligation to contribute to better environmental policy (Section III). I then consider objections alleging that voting and reducing emissions are morally different (Section IV). In closing, I reiterate that I take no stand on whether the futility objection does indeed undermine an individual moral obligation to reduce emissions (Section V).

I. THE FUTILITY OBJECTION TO INDIVIDUAL ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

Take paradigmatic cases of individual environmental action: riding a bike to work instead of driving, buying a hybrid, shopping for used clothes, and so on. None of these actions will make any significant difference to the harms associated with climate change. Climate change will be just as harmful if I ride my bike rather than drive my car. Riding to work to combat climate change is, in a word, *futile*.

At first blush, it’s hard to see why we’d be obligated to perform futile actions. I doubt that many would claim that we’re obligated to drive to a well, toss in some

1. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *It’s Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations*, in CLIMATE ETHICS: ESSENTIAL READINGS 344 (Stephen M. Gardiner et al. eds., 2010).

2. Mark Budolfson, *Collective Action, Climate Change, and the Ethical Significance of Futility*, PRINCETON UNIV. 9 (2012), <https://budolfson.github.io/files/BudolfsonFutility.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/D4DS-B72W>] (quoted with the permission of the author).

3. JOHN BROOME, CLIMATE MATTERS: ETHICS IN A WARMING WORLD 100 (1st ed. 2012).

coins, and *wish* for a solution to climate change. The wish would not do any good.

Intuitively, the point stands even when someone makes a futile contribution to a collective effort aimed at a worthy end, such as mitigating climate change. Suppose that your town is at risk of flooding, but this can be prevented if sufficiently many townspeople help build a levee.⁴ However, you know that far too few townspeople are helping to get the levee built. Here it seems as though you are not obligated to futilely add a contribution of your own. This intuition can be substantiated by the following principle, introduced by Budolfson:

If you know that a course of action would be costly to you, and that there are no significant welfare-based reasons that support that course of action, and that there are also no significant deontological reasons that support that course of action, then you are not required to take that course of action.⁵

This principle speaks against an individual duty to reduce emissions because reducing your emissions is both personally costly and futile in the sense of failing to meaningfully promote social welfare. (Whether there are significant deontological reasons to reduce emissions is a question I will address later).

Sinnott-Armstrong does not offer us a general account of why we lack the obligation to combat climate change directly. Instead, he considers various arguments for why we might have such an obligation and finds them all unsatisfactory. I will review some below.

One principled explanation for the wrongness of, say, wasteful driving is that it violates an obligation not to cause direct harm to others. Sinnott-Armstrong and Budolfson each consider versions of this argument and find it unpersuasive. Their objections appeal to the insignificance of a single individual's actions. As Sinnott-Armstrong puts the point:

Global warming will still occur even if I do not drive just for fun. Moreover, even if I do drive a gas guzzler just for fun for a long time, global warming will not occur unless lots of other people also expel greenhouse gases. So my individual act is neither necessary nor sufficient for global warming.⁶

Budolfson allows that individual carbon emissions may indeed directly harm others but argues that the harm is small enough to qualify as morally insignificant. By analogy, Budolfson argues that it is morally permissible to use a snow-making machine to entertain your children even though that will cause a few unwanted snowflakes to land on your neighbor's head.⁷ Along the same lines, a family is

4. This case is adapted from Christopher Freiman, *Picking Our Poison: A Conditional Defense of Geoengineering*, 38 SOC. PHIL. & POL'Y 11, 22 (2021).

5. Budolfson, *supra* note 2, at 7.

6. Sinnott-Armstrong, *supra* note 1, at 334.

7. See Budolfson, *supra* note 2, at 18.

morally permitted to have a snowball fight in their backyard even though a snowball may shed a snowflake and land on their neighbor's window, ever-so-slightly obscuring their view.

What about playing an *indirect* role in harming others?⁸ Maybe your friends and neighbors see you taking out your gas-guzzler for a joyride and are inspired to do the same.

There are several problems with this argument. First, it is probably making unrealistic assumptions about how influential we are.⁹ Second, even if we *do* influence people in our social circle, our social circle is still too small to affect a problem as large as global warming.¹⁰ Lastly, the indirect harm argument would, at most, establish the wrongness of *observed* joyriding rather than the wrongness of joyriding as such—you could always go for the ride late at night when your neighbors will not see you.

What about the argument that it is morally wrong to contribute to a problem?¹¹ The issue here is that while the joyride does add to the carbon in the atmosphere, it nevertheless fails to contribute to the *problem*—that is, the harms brought about by climate change—in a morally significant way. The joyride will not worsen the harm suffered by anyone, despite emitting some carbon.¹² Adding carbon to the atmosphere is like adding a thimbleful of water to a flood. Although it contributes to the flood, the extra water does not make the problem worse—the flooded town is in equally bad shape with or without the thimbleful of water.¹³

Sinnott-Armstrong and Budolfson both dismiss a Kantian universalizability argument, too.¹⁴ The maxim, “I’ll go for a joyride to have some fun” does not generate a contradiction when universalized.¹⁵ The rule consequentialist principle that you should not perform actions that would produce bad consequences if (nearly) everyone acted similarly does not fare any better.¹⁶ If everyone spent their days playing baseball, that would produce disastrous consequences (no one would produce or distribute food, for instance), but being a professional baseball player is not immoral.

To reiterate: I’m simply assuming for argument’s sake that the futility objection to an individual obligation to reduce emissions is successful. What I object to is rejecting an individual obligation to reduce emissions on the grounds of futility while at the same time accepting an individual obligation to contribute to effective environmental policy as Sinnott-Armstrong and Budolfson do.

8. Sinnott-Armstrong, *supra* note 1, at 336.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.* at 337.

12. *Id.*

13. I have adapted this case from Sinnott-Armstrong, *supra* note 1, at 335.

14. Sinnott-Armstrong, *supra* note 1, at 338, 341; *see also* Budolfson, *supra* note 2, at 14.

15. Sinnott-Armstrong, *supra* note 1, at 338.

16. *Id.* at 341.

II. POLITICAL ADVOCACY IS FUTILE AND COSTLY

Promoting effective environmental policy is, much like reducing one's emissions, both futile and personally costly. So, we should expect the arguments against an individual duty to reduce one's emissions to carry over to an individual duty to promote effective environmental policy.

Let's take a vote for effective environmental policy as an example. Your odds of casting a decisive vote in a United States presidential election are roughly one in 60 million.¹⁷ (Your odds of affecting a local election are, of course, higher—but local elections generally are not going to make a difference to a global problem like climate change.)

Forms of political action other than voting also tend to be inconsequential. Take participation in protests. As Budolfson stresses, what matters is not the *average* effect of an actor but the *marginal* effect.¹⁸ Even if a climate change protest influences climate policy, the issue is your impact at the margin. The protest would have been just as effective without you, suggesting that your participation in the protest is futile in the relevant sense.

An individual's political advocacy, like an individual's environmental action, is typically futile—but is it *costly*? One might object that voting for better environmental policy (for instance) only takes a few minutes and is therefore disanalogous to costly actions like buying a hybrid car.¹⁹

In reply, I will note that while voting as such is cheap, casting an informed and unbiased vote for effective climate policy is costly.²⁰ By analogy, making the uninformed purchase of a gas-guzzling SUV because you have the false belief it is a low-emissions vehicle does not actually contribute to clean air.²¹ What *does* make a contribution to effective environmental policy is (e.g.) a vote for people and policies that would *actually* mitigate climate change. To do your duty to promote effective environmental policy, then, you must vote for the candidate who will better advance effective environmental policy—or at least vote on the basis of justified beliefs about which candidate will better advance effective environmental policy. And forming these beliefs is costly.

To start, voters must acquire information about the candidates and their preferred environmental policies. Do they support clean energy subsidies, a carbon tax, cap-and-trade, etc.? And what exactly *are* these programs anyway? After all,

17. Andrew Gelman et al., *What is the Probability Your Vote Will Make a Difference?*, 50 *ECON. INQUIRY* 321 (2012).

18. See Budolfson, *supra* note 2, at 40.

19. Budolfson, *supra* note 2, at 37 (“[I]t is not costly to vote in an election, whereas it is costly to reduce your emissions by a substantial amount[.]”).

20. See CHRISTOPHER FREIMAN, *WHY IT'S OK TO IGNORE POLITICS* ch. 1 (1st ed. 2020); see also Jason Brennan & Christopher Freiman, *Why Swing-State Voting Is Not Effective Altruism: The Bad News about the Good News about Voting*, 31 *J. POL. PHIL.* 60 (2023).

21. This case is from CHRISTOPHER FREIMAN, *UNEQUIVOCAL JUSTICE* 9 (1st ed. 2017).

more Americans think that cap-and-trade is about regulating Wall Street than regulating emissions.²²

Even with this kind of information in hand, you need to put in more work to assess it. You need to know, for instance, the environmental effects of fracking to determine if it's a good idea. You need to know something about economics to know if energy subsidies, taxes, or emissions trading will work as designed. And there are political questions. Do energy subsidies tend to go to effective renewable energy companies or ineffective companies with political connections?

Last but not least, you must process all of the relevant information in the right way. This job is harder than it looks at first—specifically, voters have to dislodge biases that distort beliefs about climate change and environmental policy. Evidence suggests that many Americans engage in *politically motivated reasoning*—rather than form political beliefs on the basis of an impartial review of the relevant facts, they interpret the facts in the ways needed to affirm their preexisting political commitments.²³ And it's worth noting that people engage in politically motivated reasoning with respect to beliefs relevant to climate policy in particular.²⁴ Dislodging these biases is difficult, and many of the techniques that show promise take quite a bit of time to practice.²⁵

III. THE FUTILITY OBJECTION TO INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL ACTION

In this section, I will briefly review the arguments against individual environmental action surveyed in section one and show that they apply to individual political action.

The general obligation to avoid doing direct harm does not generate an obligation to promote effective environmental policy. For one, failing to promote effective environmental policy involves a failure to act at all rather than acting in a harmful way.

Might you nevertheless have an obligation not to cast a *bad* vote—here, a vote against effective climate policy? Suppose Tobias casts a vote for the candidate whose jokes he found the funniest, despite knowing that she will support harmful environmental policy. Even so, his vote would not violate an obligation to avoid causing direct harm because it will not change the election outcome.

22. *Congress Pushes Cap and Trade, But Just 24% Know What It Is*, RASMUSSEN REPS. (May 11, 2009), https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/current_events/environment_energy/congress_pushes_cap_and_trade_but_just_24_know_what_it_is [<https://perma.cc/8PHR-B43M>].

23. See Dan M. Kahan, *The Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm, Part 1: What Politically Motivated Reasoning Is and How to Measure It*, in EMERGING TRENDS IN THE SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES 417 (Robert A. Scott et al. eds., 2016); see also Dan M. Kahan, *The Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm, Part 2: Unanswered Questions*, in EMERGING TRENDS IN THE SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES 418 (Robert A. Scott et al. eds., 2016).

24. See, e.g., Dan M. Kahan et al., *Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus*, 14 J. RISK RSCH. 147, 147–174 (2011).

25. For a brief survey, see FREIMAN, *WHY IT'S OK TO IGNORE POLITICS*, *supra* note 20, at 40–41.

Moving on, if the obligation to avoid *indirect* harm fails to establish an obligation to avoid joyriding, it also fails to establish an obligation to avoid bad voting. First, our vote is unlikely to cause others to vote similarly (especially given that others typically do not know how we vote). Even if it does, it will influence too few voters to make a difference to the electoral outcome.

What about an obligation to avoid worsening a problem? Casting a bad vote does not worsen the harms of bad governance, just as expelling a joyride's worth of carbon does not worsen the harms of climate change. They are both like spilling a thimbleful of water in flood—the damage caused by the flood is the same with or without the extra water.

Recall that one argument considered and rejected by both Sinnott-Armstrong and Budolfson appeals to universalizability.²⁶ The maxim, "I'll vote for a candidate who supports bad climate policies," does not generate a contradiction when universalized. Now consider the rule consequentialist principle that you shouldn't perform actions that would produce bad consequences if (nearly) everyone acted similarly. It is true that if *everyone* goes joyriding, significant harm will result. But remember that this argument proves too much. If everyone played baseball instead of farming, we'd starve. Yet it's permissible to play baseball rather than farm.

This reply to the rule consequentialist argument for a duty to reduce emissions applies equally to the rule consequentialist argument for a duty to vote for good environmental policy. Indeed, Loren Lomasky and Geoffrey Brennan make this sort of point in their argument against a duty to vote.²⁷ If everyone casts uninformed and biased votes (or abstains from voting entirely), then significant harm will result. But an individual is not obligated to vote well, just as they are not obligated to bike to work or farm.

Are there significant deontological reasons to vote for effective environmental policy? Budolfson says, "It is plausible that you have important deontological reasons to vote, whereas you do not have important deontological reasons to reduce your emissions by a substantial amount."²⁸ Budolfson acknowledges the difficulty in identifying such deontological reasons; here, I will simply note that the symmetry between individual political and environmental action suggests that any deontological reason to vote for effective environmental policy is likely to apply to reducing emissions as well.²⁹

Consider, for instance, the argument that fairness considerations obligate citizens to vote.³⁰ The idea here is that you benefit from the good governance that

26. See Sinnott-Armstrong, *supra* note 1, at 338–341; see also BUDOLFSON, *supra* note 2, at 14.

27. Loren Lomasky & Geoffrey Brennan, *Is There a Duty to Vote?*, 17 SOC. PHIL. & POL'Y 62 (2000).

28. BUDOLFSON, *supra* note 2, at 37.

29. *Id.* at 37 n.31 ("To say it is an easy problem compared to another problem is not to suggest that anyone has ever offered a convincing argument that citizens are required to vote in elections, especially from a utilitarian perspective.")

30. Jeremy Waldron, *Participation: The Right of Rights*, 98 PROC. ARISTOTELIAN SOC'Y 307, 318 (1998).

informed voters provide and so you are obligated to contribute an informed vote of your own to avoid free-riding. Regardless of whether this argument is successful, what's critical is that it would also imply a duty to reduce one's emissions—that is, one is obligated to contribute to cleaner air to avoid free-riding on the efforts of those who have made their own contribution, and therefore, the symmetry between environmental and political action would remain.³¹

Consider next Julia Maskivker's "collective Samaritanism" argument for a duty to vote.³² The argument, in brief, alleges that individuals are obligated to contribute to beneficial collective activities, even with their contribution is inconsequential, provided that the personal cost is sufficiently low. Individuals are therefore obligated to vote well because voting well is a beneficial collective activity that improves governance.³³ Here again, if this argument for a duty to vote succeeds, it would also vindicate a duty to reduce emissions given that the latter also involves a contribution to a beneficial collective activity.³⁴

There are other arguments for a duty to vote, but I will not explore them here. The key point is that casting a vote, like biking to work, is both futile and costly, so we should expect that any deontological reason to do one will apply to the other.³⁵

IV. OBJECTIONS

Perhaps voting and reducing emissions are importantly different in ways that would generate a duty to vote but not to reduce emissions. Let's look at two possibilities.

31. See BUDOLFSON, *supra* note 2, at 10, for the suggestion that fairness considerations may obligate us to contribute to clean air when sufficiently many others are contributing, but that, as a matter of fact, too few are contributing to generate this obligation. He writes:

The conclusion that as things stand individuals are not required to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions is consistent with the view that each would be required to make such reductions if the rest of the world somehow managed to cooperate and reduce emissions in a way that had some hope of making an important difference to the climatic outcome. Such claims are perfectly consistent because there is an important difference between, on the one hand, what individuals are required to do in a collective action problem in which almost everyone else is *defecting*, and, on the other hand, what individuals are required to do in an otherwise similar collective action problem in which most others are *cooperating*.

The same account applies to political action and, as a matter of fact, too few political actors are contributing to effective climate policy to generate an obligation to make a contribution of one's own.

32. JULIA MASKIVKER, *THE DUTY TO VOTE* (2019).

33. For some doubts about this argument, see Christopher Freiman, *Julia Maskivker, The Duty to Vote . . .*, 56 J. VALUE INQUIRY 517 (2022) (reviewing MASKIVKER, *supra* note 32); Jason Brennan & Christopher Freiman, *Must Good Samaritans Vote?*, POL. ONLINE (May 6, 2021).

34. See Ty Raterman, *Bearing the Weight of the World: On the Extent of an Individual's Environmental Responsibility*, 21 ENV'T VALUES 417, 426 (2012) (drawing a similar parallel).

35. FREIMAN, *supra* note 21, at 7–10 (exploring in greater depth the idea that governmental solutions to the problem of climate change run into the same kind of collective action problem that generates climate change).

A. *The Stampede Case*

Budolfson argues that there are cases where group members are *not* obligated to stop participating in a harmful group activity but *are* obligated to take actions to stop that harmful group activity. To illustrate, he offers a thought experiment:

[I]magine that we find ourselves in the middle of a stampede. If the stampede continues, it is clear that an increasing number of innocent people will be killed. Luckily, each of us has a button in our hands: once more than 50% of us press our buttons, a painless ‘sleep’ device in all of our spines will be activated, causing the stampede to stop peacefully. Other than pressing the button and then continuing to stampede, the only other options we have are to continue stampeding without pressing the button, or else to stop stampeding and certainly be run over and killed.³⁶

In this case, we have no obligation to stop stampeding. However, we do have an obligation to press our button. By analogy, “individuals are not required to *reduce emissions*, although individuals are required to *favor effective public policy solutions to climate change*.”³⁷ Budolfson continues, “the thing that individuals are required to do about climate change is *political*, and not directly tied to personal emissions.”³⁸ Since it looks like you do have an obligation to press the button despite lacking an obligation to stop stampeding, if the stampede case is indeed analogous to political support for effective environmental policy, then you may have an obligation to vote for effective environmental policy without having an obligation to reduce personal emissions.

There are at least two reasons to doubt that the stampede case vindicates a duty to promote better climate policy. First, the odds that pressing your button will stop the stampede are unspecified. But this is a crucial omission. If pushing the button has, say, a one in 60 million chance of stopping the stampede (which approximate the odds that a vote in a US presidential election will be decisive), then it’s not clear that you’re obligated to press it.

Second, presumably pressing the anti-stampede button only takes a second or two of your time. By contrast, preparing and casting a vote for effective climate policy takes hours, if not days. Thus, to make the stampede case more analogous to the voting case, we’d need to specify that spending your Saturday continuously pressing the button will have an extraordinarily small chance of stopping the stampede. Here, it looks doubtful that you’re obligated to do so given that pressing the button is both futile and costly.

36. BUDOLFSON, *supra* note 2, at 8.

37. *Id.* at 9.

38. *Id.*

B. Tipping Points

The role that tipping points play in elections suggests a potential difference between voting and reducing emissions. Budolfson notes that “your vote has some chance of tipping the scales and making a dramatic difference to the outcome.”³⁹ He then considers whether an analogous point may hold in the case of emissions, discussing the following objection: “[t]here is some danger that we will cross an emissions tipping point that will lead to a catastrophe; so, unless you reduce your emissions by a significant amount, there is some chance that you will make such a catastrophe happen. Therefore, you are required to reduce your emissions by a significant amount.”⁴⁰ If the tipping point argument works in the case of voting but not reducing emissions, then we would have an argument for a duty to promote effective environmental policy that does not carry over to a duty to reduce emissions. However, I will argue that Budolfson’s response to the tipping point argument in the case of emissions also applies to the case of voting.

First, “as things stand now and as they will stand into the foreseeable future, your personal emissions have no real chance of making a difference to the outcome.”⁴¹ Even if your polluting behavior does cross a tipping point, greenhouse gas levels are increasing, so someone else would have crossed the line if you had not: “This shows that, given the empirical facts, there is no chance that you could delay a catastrophic tipping point from being crossed today or in the foreseeable future by reducing your emissions, and thus there is no good reason for reducing emissions that arises from the possibility of tipping points being crossed now or in the foreseeable future.”⁴²

We might hope, though, that at some point in the not-too-distant future we will start to see decreasing greenhouse gas levels. In these conditions, might the tipping point argument establish a duty to reduce emissions? Budolfson thinks not. He claims that the tipping point argument fails in principle because it’s too risk-averse:

The most decisive way of showing that tipping point reasoning is misguided is to note that it overgeneralizes in absurd ways. The basis for this observation is the empirical fact that when emissions cause harm, the most direct cause of that harm in the causal chain is always something like sea level rise, temperature and weather changes, or changes in the risk for other health and welfare issues such as melanoma. In light of the effect that a single individual has on these more direct causes via his or her emissions, and how that effect compares to his or her impact on such things via non-emissions activities, it is hard to see how an individual’s emissions could be seriously objectionable as things stand on the basis of these effects. For example, the probability of causing a climatic catastrophe by your personal emissions is roughly the same as the probability

39. *Id.* at 37.

40. *Id.* at 36.

41. *Id.* at 37.

42. *Id.* at 36.

of causing a climatic catastrophe by putting a boat in the ocean or having a cup of tea every day, given that the effects of your emissions on the potential causes of climatic catastrophe such as sea level rise and air temperature increase are about the same as the effects on those things of taking a swim in the ocean and boiling water for tea every day, respectively.⁴³

Budolfson continues, noting that “it would be absurd to think that putting a boat into the ocean and boiling water for tea are morally wrong because of the chance that you might thereby cause a climatic catastrophe, just as it is absurd to think that that using hairspray and other everyday products is wrong because of the *de minimis* increased risk of cancer that you thereby impose on others.”⁴⁴ The principle Rudolfson invokes here seems to be something like this: it is morally permissible to secure perceptible benefits for yourself even when doing so imposes a *de minimis* risk of a significant harm to others. It’s important to note that this claim is not ad hoc; rather it is motivated by his more general principle: “If you know that a course of action would be costly to you, and that there are no significant welfare-based reasons that support that course of action, and that there are also no significant deontological reasons that support that course of action, then you are not required to take that course of action.”⁴⁵ Because the risk of harm is so small, it does not constitute a significant welfare-based reason against the action.

This point extends to plenty of other cases as well. For instance, it is not wrong for a licensed pilot to fly a helicopter for fun even though there is an extremely small chance she could accidentally crash it into a school assembly. There is a non-zero chance that, when you drive your car to get some ice cream, the brakes will fail, and you will careen into a bunch of pedestrians. Still, you’re permitted to drive to an ice cream parlor.

Let’s get back to voting. Remember the principle: it’s morally permissible to secure perceptible benefits for yourself even when doing so imposes a *de minimis* risk of a significant harm to others. Spending your weekend at the beach with your family is a perceptible benefit. By spending that time on the sand rather than watching C-SPAN and casting an informed vote, you “impose” a *de minimis* risk that effective environmental policy will not be implemented. Nevertheless, it is permissible to do so—just as it is permissible to buy a pack of gum instead of a Powerball lottery ticket that you could donate to the Environmental Defense Fund.

V. CONCLUSION

I’ve argued for a conditional: if we have no obligation to reduce our individual emissions, then we have no obligation to promote effective environmental policy.

43. *Id.* at 38.

44. *Id.* at 39.

45. *Id.* at 7.

I will note in passing this point applies to other “institutional critiques” of individual action. Consider the view that the rich are not obligated to donate their spare income to the poor but *are* obligated to vote to raise their own taxes to fund redistribution. One reason someone might hold this view is because an individual donation is merely, in G.A. Cohen’s words, a “drop in the ocean”—it will not have a meaningful impact on a national income distribution.⁴⁶ Note, though, that an individual vote for higher taxes will not have a meaningful impact either.⁴⁷ (Indeed, if anything, an individual donation will have a much more significant impact than a vote or a bike ride to work.) So, if we have no obligation to donate to the poor on the grounds that an individual donation is insignificant, we have no obligation to support redistributive policies either.

Perhaps the sorts of objections mobilized by Sinnott-Armstrong and Budolfson miss the mark for some reason—maybe we *do* have an obligation to reduce our carbon footprint after all, in which case we could make a defense of an obligation to support effective environmental policy. I take no stance here. However, we may not claim that there is no individual duty to cut your emissions while simultaneously claiming that there *is* an individual duty to support effective environmental policy. If the futility objection undermines an obligation to reduce emissions, it undermines an obligation to promote effective environmental policy as well.

46. G.A. Cohen, *If You're An Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich*, 4 J. ETHICS 1, 15 (2000).

47. See Jason Brennan & Christopher Freiman, *If You're An Egalitarian, You Shouldn't Be So Rich*, 25 J. ETHICS 323, 324 (2021).