KANTIAN MORAL OBLIGATIONS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
The requirements for
The Degree

Master of Arts
In
Philosophy

By

Ryan Thomas McGuire

San Francisco, California

May 2020
CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Kantian Moral Obligations and Climate Change* by Ryan Thomas McGuire, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree: Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University

Shelley Wilcox
Professor of Philosophy

Jeremy Reid
Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Joel Kassiola
Professor of Political Science
KANTIAN MORAL OBLIGATIONS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Ryan Thomas McGuire
San Francisco, California
2020

(Abstract in progress)

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

Chair, Thesis Committee

Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe gratitude to a great many people. First, I thank my thesis committee, Drs. Shelley Wilcox, Joel Kassiola, and Jeremy Reid for their time, support, and thoughtful feedback. I thank my family, friends, and professors for their patience, support, and encouragement. In particular, I am very thankful to the late Anita Silvers for her guidance, support, and push in the right direction.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page......................................................................................................................i

Certification of Approval.................................................................................................ii

Abstract..........................................................................................................................iii

Acknowledgement..........................................................................................................iv

Table of Contents..........................................................................................................v

Introduction......................................................................................................................1

I. The X Problem.............................................................................................................2

II. The Harm-Based Approach.......................................................................................8

III. My Kantian Alternative............................................................................................17

   A. Why Objections to the Kantian Approach Fail.....................................................18

   B. My Alternative Kantian Approach.......................................................................20

IV. Potential Objections..................................................................................................23

V. Conclusion..................................................................................................................26

Works Cited...................................................................................................................28
In his 2005 paper, “It’s Not *My* Fault,” Walter Sinnott-Armstrong provides a perplexing moral problem. He argues that there is “no defensible principle to support the claim that I have a moral obligation not to drive a gas guzzler just for fun.” Generalizing from this example, Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument suggests that although many common individual actions, like driving a gas guzzler car for fun, might appear to be morally objectionable, none of our moral principles can explain what makes these acts morally impermissible. Thus, he concludes, our moral principles are currently unable to provide direction for what individuals ought to do about climate change.

As could be expected, many excellent philosophers have attempted to provide a suitable explanation for why driving a gas guzzler for fun would be morally objectionable. Their responses take many different forms. Generally, most of them rely on the premise that the production of greenhouse gas emissions by individuals causes harm. They either simply refute or ignore the important premise underlying Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument that specific acts performed by individuals, like joyriding in a gas-guzzler, can contribute to climate change but not in a way that would cause harm. This is the problematic factor that makes arguing for individual moral obligations regarding climate change a unique moral challenge. I find this position difficult, if not impossible, to defend.

This paper endeavors to provide a defensible moral principle that gives us a moral obligation not to drive a gas guzzler for fun without relying on the premise that individual acts cause harm. It will do this in four parts. First, I will examine the philosophical

---

problem provided by Sinnott-Armstrong’s paper, which I will call the X problem, and provide a simplified formal version of the problem by identifying it as the failure of moral principle to restrict persons from performing acts like driving a gas guzzling SUV for fun. Next, I will consider the harm-based response to Sinnott-Armstrong by examining the arguments of Avram Hiller, Lauren Hartzell-Nichols, and Marion Hourdequin. I will argue that all of these responses fail because they do not adequately address the difficult causal connection between individual acts and the harms of climate change. Then, I will provide an alternative response using Kantian moral philosophy to explain why driving a gas guzzling SUV for fun is morally impermissible. Finally, I will consider some potential objections to my approach before concluding.

I. THE X PROBLEM

To begin, this section will explain and examine the philosophical problem provided by Sinnott-Armstrong’s paper, which I will call the X problem. It will do so in four parts. First, I will situate this particular moral challenge in the context of more general discussion regarding collective action problems. Next, I will outline some of the basic assumptions underlying my argument. Then, I will examine the X problem provided in Sinnott-Armstrong’s paper and analyze the action underlying this problem. Finally, I will explain the need to refute this problem based on our shared moral intuition that it is wrong to drive a gas guzzler for fun.

I recognize the X problem and the moral challenge of climate change as belonging to the group of collective action problems. In his paper, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Garrett Hardin identifies the issue that characterizes many collective action
problems.\(^2\) He calls this issue the tragedy of the commons. Hardin explains this issue with the example of a pasture. This pasture is shared by many herdsman. Each herdsman acts as a rational being in guiding their actions. The problem arises when each rational herdsman is making their cost versus benefit calculations independently. For each herdsman, they decide to keeping adding sheep until the overgrazing causes the tragedy of the commons. The benefits to each herdsman by adding a sheep outweigh the harms caused because any harm is equally shared among all of the herdsman. Thus every herdsman keeps adding more sheep until it overwhelms the pasture. As Hardin explains, “Freedom in the commons brings ruin to all.” In the more recent, “Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons,” Baylor Johnson connects the tragedy of the commons to climate change and argues against approaches that rely on the voluntary actions of private individuals. Johnson argues that only large-scale collective action can address this problem.\(^3\) Collective action problems in general belong to a more complex set of issues that have extensive literature focused on them but are beyond the scope of this paper.\(^4\) However, Johnson’s argument is very similar to one offered by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong.

Following many others in the ethics and climate change literature, I will provide some of the basic assumptions required for this discussion. As this is not a scientific


paper on climate change but a philosophical argument, these assumptions will underlie many of the premises considered in both my argument and the other arguments. However, I will not provide arguments to support these assumptions at the present time. First, I assume that the global average climate is currently warming. Next, I assume that global warming is mainly the result of human activity, particularly our production of greenhouse gas emissions. Then, I assume that an individual act is not sufficient to cause climate change. Finally, global warming will be harmful for both the environment and the humans who inhabit it. Further, I will be using the terms global warming, climate change, and climate crisis almost synonymously.

The X problem that I identify in Sinnott-Armstrong’s paper is not a specific problem he identifies but rather a formalized version of the moral issue I perceive to be the focus of his paper. In his examination of individual obligations regarding climate change, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong focuses on the example of driving a gas guzzling SUV for pleasure on a Sunday afternoon. This example has three essential features that I view as the reasons Sinnott-Armstrong had for choosing this example.

First, the example involves an act that (i) contributes to global warming. Sinnott-Armstrong selects driving a gas guzzling SUV because our use of motorized vehicles that burn fossil fuels for transport has often been the typical example of actions that negatively impact the climate. In this context, driving a gas guzzling SUV represents the most extreme form of this example. For those concerned about the health of the climate, SUV drivers seem to be one of the best representations of an enemy to the health
of the climate. Although Sinnott-Armstrong would argue that this act does not significantly contribute to climate change, this act still does contribute to climate change.

Next, the example involves an act that is (ii) performed purely for pleasure. Sinnott-Armstrong acknowledges that there are many times when we perform activities that contribute to climate change for necessary purposes. For example, driving our car to go grocery shopping seems to be a more justifiable reason for performing an act that contributes to climate change. For this reason, the example Sinnott-Armstrong selects involves an act performed purely for personal enjoyment. We are driving our gas guzzling SUV for fun. We enjoy driving it.

It could be argued that not everyone would find this activity pleasurable. Also, there may be other more enjoyable activities that do not contribute to climate change. Both of these points are true. However, an act that is enjoyable but does not contribute to climate change would be useless for our examination. Our focus is on the acts that contribute to global warming.

Third, the example involves an act that is (iii) harmful to the climate when performed often and by large groups but, in this instance, is only performed rarely and by a single individual and thus not harmful to the climate. Sinnott-Armstrong allows for the possibility that we have borrowed this SUV from a friend and only drive it on a particular sunny day. This is not the vehicle we use to commute regularly to work. It is a rare isolated instance. It might be argued that this act still constitutes harm. However,

---

5 Ibid., 333.
6 This will be argued later by Avram Hiller.
Sinnott-Armstrong would likely support the position that this act does not constitute a harm by pointing out that this act is neither necessary nor sufficient for global warming.\textsuperscript{7} Global warming will still occur in the same way if I did not drive this gas guzzling SUV. Thus, it cannot be argued that my act has contributed in a harmful way to climate change.

From these three essential features of Sinnott-Armstrong’s example, we can identify the action central to the X problem. I will call this action (A):

Action (A) is an action that (i) contributes to climate change, (ii) is performed purely for pleasure, and is (iii) harmful to the climate when performed often and by large groups but, in this instance, is only performed rarely and by a single individual and thus not harmful to the climate.

We should note that Sinnott-Armstrong’s example is not the only action that could be used for our examination of the X problem. Any actions that include these three essential features can be used as an example in place of Sinnott-Armstrong’s taking a pleasurable Sunday drive in a gas guzzling SUV.

The X problem is merely the combination of action (A) and the conclusion that Sinnott-Armstrong argues for in his paper. It can be understood as follows:

The X problem is the moral problem that there is no defensible moral principle that can give us a moral obligation not to perform action (A).

Notice that, although the X problem is closely related to Sinnott-Armstrong’s conclusion, the problem is a generalized form of which Sinnott-Armstrong’s conclusion is a specified instance. This due to the fact that, although Sinnott-Armstrong’s paper focuses on his

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 334.
example of driving a gas guzzling SUV, this problem can be expanded to include many different individual actions regarding climate change.

For example, we can also consider this situation. It is a warm day in the middle of summer. For the past couple months, I have left the thermostat set at a warmer temperature because I understand that doing so would result in less energy use. My using less energy reduces the need to burn fossil fuels to produce that energy. In this way, keeping the thermostat warmer in warmer weather reduces or eliminates any negative contribution to global warming. However, one day I decide that I am tired of this hot weather. I decide to stay inside all day, watch wintery movies, and turn down the thermostat to an extremely low temperature. However, my doing so will increase the need to burn fossil fuels to provide the energy to run my air conditioning. Thus, I will be contributing to global warming.

Notice that this act, turning down the thermostat, also encompasses all the essential features of action (A). Turning down the thermostat is an action that (i) contributes to climate change. It contributes by requiring the burning of fossil fuels. It is (ii) performed purely for pleasure. I have no reason to do so other than the pure enjoyment. Finally, it is (iii) harmful to the climate when performed often and by large groups but, in this instance, is only performed rarely and by a single individual and thus not harmful to the climate. If everyone kept their thermostats set extremely low in warm weather, the energy required to run all those air conditioning units would require massive amounts of fossil fuel burning. This would definitely have a significant negative effect on
global warming. However, it seems difficult to argue that my isolated individual act would also have a harmful effect.

This example, like many others, could represent an instance of action (A). The X problem, that I identify the moral issue in Sinnott-Armstrong's paper, is the moral problem that arises if our moral principles struggle or fail to provide us with a moral obligation not to perform these actions. Can our moral principles provide us with a moral obligation not to turn the thermostat very low for fun? Sinnott-Armstong's paper provides an argument that this problem is indeed a real problem.

Although I disagree with Walter Sinnott-Armstrong when he would argue that there is no defensible moral principle that would provide me with an obligation not to perform action (A), I still hold that it is important for us to be able to provide an adequate response to this problem. But why? I take it as a basic assumption that we all share the moral intuition that that action (A) is wrong. Sinnott-Armstrong would probably argue that this moral intuition is simply wrong. In this paper, I aim to provide a successful refutation of Sinnott-Armstrong.

II. THE HARM-BASED APPROACH

In order to support my thesis and assuage the X problem, I will first provide some other attempts in the literature to counter Sinnott-Armstrong's argument and explain why they struggle or fail to provide a defensible moral principle that assuages the X problem. It seems that many attempts fail because they rely on a common premise that actions like action (A) cause harm. This section will show this in three parts. First, it will analyze three arguments provided by Avram Hiller, Lauren Hartzell-Nichols, and Marion
Hourdequin, of what I identify to be the Harm-Based Approach. Next, I will explain the underlying premise they share that performing an action that would harm the climate when performed by a large group is harmful in itself. Finally, I will explain that these arguments fail to support this premise because they do not clearly connect the individual action with the harm caused by climate change.

In his 2011 paper, “Climate Change and Individual Responsibility,” Avram Hiller argues that Sinnott-Armstrong’s position, which Hiller characterizes as “the claim of individual causal inefficacy, (ICI)” is false. Hiller supports this conclusion with two main points. First, Hiller undermines Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument by calling into question the relationship between acts like driving a gas guzzling SUV for pleasure and the actual cause of climate change. Sinnott-Armstrong seems to acknowledge that, in some way, human beings contribute to climate change. However, Hiller asks “if individual actions such as Sunday drives are not the causes of climate change, then what does cause climate change?” This is a very good question. According to Hiller, on Sinnott-Armstrong’s view it must be some kind of “metaphysically odd emergent entity.” Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument seems to be caught in an awkward position. Second, Hiller supports his conclusion by arguing “an expected (dis-)utility calculation shows that individual acts do make an expected difference, and one that is not insignificant.” Hiller supports this point with three sub-points. First, if the totality of climate change is harmful

---

9 Ibid., 349.
10 Ibid., 349.
then any individual act that contributes to climate change causes an expected harm. That expected harm increases with any increase in the totality of climate change. Individual acts, like Sunday drives, contribute to climate change. Therefore, individual acts, like Sunday drives, cause an expected harm. Ultimately, Hiller advocates for a moral principle that “it is prima facie wrong to perform an act which has an expected amount of harm greater than another easily available alternative.”

In her 2012 paper, “How is Climate Change Harmful?” Lauren Hartzell-Nichols provides an argument that is not a direct refutation of Sinnott-Armstrong but easily lends itself to that use. Hartzell-Nichols argues that we must view the harm involved in climate change differently than we normally conceive of harm. Specifically, she argues “[climate change] is harmful insofar as it owes to acts of de dicto harming.” She appeals to Casper Hare’s de re vs. de dicto distinction of harm. The de re conception of harm pertains to a specific subject of harm (e.g. Jenna’s son Sam). The de dicto conception of harm pertains to a non-specific subject of harm (e.g. Jenna’s future child). Hartzell-Nichols uses this distinction as a response to Parfit’s nonidentity problem and also intergeneration harms like climate change. Although she only briefly mentions the Sinnott-Armstrong paper in a footnote, one could see that this distinction in conceptions

11 Ibid., 355.
12 Ibid., 352.
14 Ibid., 102.
15 Ibid., Footnote 5.
of harm could provide support to those who oppose Sinnott-Armstrong’s position. An argument of this sort would hold that, although action (A) does not qualify as harm on the de re conception, action (A) is harmful according to the de dicto conception of harm. Therefore, we have a moral obligation not to perform action (A) because it causes harm.

In her 2010 paper, “Climate, Collective Action and Individual Ethical Obligations,” Marion Hourdequin defends two points in opposition to Sinnott-Armstrong. First, she makes an appeal to moral integrity. Hourdequin highlights the fact that Sinnott-Armstrong and those who make similar arguments acknowledge that we have collective obligations regarding climate change. For example, we have obligations to vote for representatives and measures that fight global warming. Hourdequin’s view is that if we believe we have obligations as a collective to reduce greenhouse gas emissions then we must also have obligations as individuals to reduce personal greenhouse gas emissions. She appeals to Audi and Murphy’s conception of integrity. A person of integrity would have internalized their commitment to fighting global warming to such a level that it would be odd for them to advocate large-scale political change as they ignore these commitments on a small-scale personal level. Second, to further support her opposition to the distinction between collective and personal obligations, Hourdequin

---


17 Ibid., 447-451.

appeals to the Confucian conception of the self as relational rather than atomic. In other words, Confucianism reveals that we cannot separate ourselves as individuals from our social connections. Therefore, if we have collective obligations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (as Sinnott-Armstrong acknowledges) then we also have obligations as individuals.

These three responses represent the harm-based approach because they, in different ways, deny the possibility of the third essential feature of action (A). This feature holds that action (A) is harmful to the climate when performed often and by large groups but, in this instance, is only performed rarely and by a single individual and thus not harmful to the climate. In order to be successful, an argument of this approach must show the link between and individual act, like driving a gas guzzler SUV, and the harms caused by this act. This connection, when clearly identified, combined with the \textit{prima facie} principle not to cause unnecessary harm would be sufficient to provide us with an obligation not to perform action (A). Avram Hiller’s argument directly refutes the possibility of an action having this feature. Hiller argues that if climate change causes harm then any action that contributes to climate change also causes harm. Therefore, for Hiller, since actions like action (A) still contribute to climate change, these actions also cause harm. The argument derived for Lauren Hartzell-Nichols paper would refute the third essential feature of action (A) by appealing to the \textit{de dicto} conception of harm. Although action (A) is not harmful on the \textit{de re} conception of harm because the act cannot be directly linked to a specific subject of harm, action (A) is harmful on the \textit{de re} conception of harm because the act

\footnote{Hourdequin, “Climate, Collective Action and Individual Ethical Obligations,” 452-457.}
dicto conception of harm because it harms non-specific future persons. Marion Hourdequin’s response, although not as direct a refutation as the previous two, still relies on the refutation of this third essential feature of action (A). Hourdequin’s argument calls into question the separation between collective and individual acts. All of these thinkers, including Sinnott-Armstrong, hold that these actions performed as a collective are harmful. If we cannot separate the, according to this conception of action (A), "harmless" individual actions from harmful collective actions, conceiving of these individual acts as "harmless" becomes impossible. The point of Hourdequin's argument is that our personal and public actions cannot be bifurcated. We cannot hold commitments on a public level and ignore them on a personal level. Therefore, an action that is harmful to the climate when performed often and by large groups but, in this instance, is only performed rarely and by a single individual and thus not harmful to the climate is inconceivable. It has become apparent that all three of these responses qualify as a harm-based approach because they refute the third essential feature of action (A).

Because all of these responses rely on the refutation of the same essential feature of action (A), they all struggle or fail as responses to the X problem for the same reason. They struggle or fail to respond to the X problem because they focus on the harm caused by actions regarding climate change. Although my argument will hold that our current moral principles can address the new moral issue posed by climate change, we must recognize that climate change is a unique moral issue. In particular, linking harmful actions regarding climate change to their harmful effects is much more complicated than linking the act of murder to its harmful effects. In a case of murder, it is easy to show that
the act of the murderer is what caused the victim to be murdered. However, this is not the case with moral acts regarding climate change. It is much more difficult, if not impossible, to link my drive in a gas guzzling SUV for pleasure on a random Sunday afternoon to a specific harm like someone’s home being flooded due to rising sea levels. It is this problem that provides much of the strength to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument. It is very difficult to refute this third essential feature of action (A). Although we may want to argue that isolated individual actions like driving a gas guzzling SUV for pleasure cause harm, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to support this position.

At this point, someone might object to my critique by arguing that Hiller, Hartzell-Nichols, and Hourdequin are aware of this complicated causal relationship because it is the issue their papers address. However, I would argue that their essays do not recognize this problem. The first main reason that Hiller uses to refute Sinnott-Armstrong is that “if individual actions such as Sunday drives are not causes of climate change, then what does cause climate change? The cause would have to be some metaphysically odd emergent entity.” In other words, Hiller uses a disjunctive syllogism. Either the cause of climate change is individual actions or it is some metaphysically odd emergent entity. It is not a metaphysically odd emergent entity. Therefore, it must be individual actions. This second premise is false and the first is questionable. Hiller supports the second premise by saying “[i]f individual drives do not make any difference in AGCC, but everyone’s driving does, then everyone’s driving

---

20 Thanks to my thesis committee for this insightful objection.

would have to be some odd emergent entity that is not reducible to individual acts of driving. But this is farfetched, metaphysically.” Hiller assumes that this metaphysically odd emergent entity is impossible because the cause of climate change must be reducible to individual acts. But this is exactly what makes climate change a unique moral issue. If only one person were to take a Sunday drive one time, climate change would not occur. It is only when this Sunday drive combined with other Sunday drives and other contributors like industrial activity that it forms the emergent entity that is the cause of climate change. Thus, Hiller fails to refute Sinnott-Armstrong.

In her paper, Hartzell-Nichols recognizes that “[a] further challenge to understanding the way in which climate change is harmful stems from the fact that it is hard to trace a clear causal path between GHG emissions and specific harmful outcomes.” However, she also neglects to recognize the more difficult connection between the individual acts like Sunday drives and the harmful effects of climate change. Hartzell-Nichols, in a way, identifies Hiller’s metaphysically odd emergent entity as greenhouse gas emissions but also fails to recognize that these gases, as a cause, represent a complex entity that is irreducible to the individual acts that constitute it. Therefore, when the argument derived from Hartzell-Nichols’s paper ultimately argues that “[climate change] is harmful insofar as it owes to acts of de dicto harming,” it fails to refute the moral challenge recognized by Sinnott-Armstrong because the argument cannot explain what makes individual Sunday drives harmful.

22 Ibid., 354.
23 Hartzell-Nichols, “How is Climate Change Harmful?” 99.
24 Ibid., 106.
Hourdequin’s argument appeals to integrity and the confucian conception of the self in order to refute Sinnott-Armstrong. At this moment, we will simplify this argument as saying that if we have obligations towards climate change on a collective level, integrity requires us to also respect those obligations on a personal level. Although difficult to see, Hourdequin’s argument also relies on the false assumption that individual Sunday drives are harmful in themselves. Hourdequin adopts the Audi and Murphy conception of integrity as the specific terms of “integration and being integral.”

According to this conception, being integral means to internalize the essential commitments of the individual. “Integration helps the individual avoid conflicts among her various commitments[...].” It is this idea of integration that indicates the problematic assumption. In order for there to be a conflict between a person's obligations on the political level and personal level, they must be connected in a way that would give rise to the possibility of them being in conflict. This can only be the case if individual acts like Sunday drives can be morally wrong. Thus Hourdequin must assume that individual acts also cause harm. For, if individual acts do not cause harm and are thus not morally impermissible then they could not conflict with our political commitments. In other words, if we oppose a collective action on the basis that it causes harm but the isolated individual form of that action does not cause harm, we would not be conflicting with our political obligations by performing that individual act. Thus, an individual act cannot be morally impermissible from the view of integrity without also being harmful.

---

26 Ibid., 448.
Fortunately, the harm caused by an action is not the only way we can judge an act to be morally wrong. There are wrong actions that do not cause harm. For example, we can consider this imaginary case. Alison and Betty are sisters. Betty has a personal diary in which she records her deep secrets and thoughts. Betty has asked Alison to promise never to read the diary. Alison has agreed to this promise. However, without Betty's knowledge or consent, Alison secretly reads Betty's diary. Alison never tells anyone and Betty never finds out. No harm ever occurs from Alison's action. Was it wrong for Alison to read Betty's diary? I hold that it was morally wrong for Alison to read Betty's diary. This action is morally wrong despite the fact that no harm was caused by the action. Perhaps one would argue that the act still harmed the relationship between Alison and Betty. However, it seems obvious that this act is not harmful in the way that murder is harmful. For this reason, I will provide an alternate Kantian approach that can provide an explanation for why examples of action (A) are morally wrong without appealing to harm.

III. MY KANTIAN ALTERNATIVE

This section will argue that Kant's Categorical Imperative is a defensible moral principle that gives us a moral obligation not to drive a gas guzzler for fun without relying on the premise that individual acts cause harm. In other words, Kant's Categorical Imperative can assuage the X problem. My Kantian alternative will include two parts. First, I provide the main objection from Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and others to taking a Kantian approach in providing the moral obligation to reduce individual greenhouse gas
emissions and explain why this objection fails due to a misunderstanding of Kant's ethics.

Second, I will show how a Kantian approach can provide the moral obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

A. Why Objections to the Kantian Approach Fail

In his paper Walter Sinnott-Armstrong considers two different forms of the Kantian Categorical Imperative and provides different objections to each. Although I would also argue that the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative could also provide a defensible moral principle to support my thesis and assuage the X problem, I will not provide that argument in this paper. For this reason I will focus specifically on Sinnott-Armstrong’s critique of the universal law formulation of the Categorical Imperative.27

Sinnott-Armstrong begins his analysis by explaining that Kantians “claim that the moral status of acts depends on their agents’ maxims or “subjective principle of volition”—roughly what we would call motives or intentions or plans.”28 In other words, Sinnott-Armstrong’s interpretation of a Kantian judgement of acts focuses on the intentions of the moral agents. Kantians judge actions by contemplating how the moral agent planned to act. Sinnott-Armstrong characterizes the universal law formulation as “We have a moral obligation to not to act on any maxim that we cannot will to become a


universal law." He then highlights the fact that this way to judge moral acts does not rely on the consequences of that act. From this understanding, he claims that the maxim underlying the act of driving a gas guzzling SUV for fun is "to have harmless fun." The motivation for this moral action is to enjoy myself in a way not intended to harm anyone. This maxim, according to Sinnott-Armstrong, when universalized does not yield a contradiction. Even when we consider the alternate maxim, "to expel greenhouse gases," that Sinnott-Armstrong claims Kantians might support, it does not yield a contradiction. Therefore, the universal law formulation is not a moral principle that would assuage the X problem.

Sinnott-Armstrong's interpretation goes wrong because the maxim of an action is not merely the intention that motivates the action. If that were true, the acts that qualify as immoral are very few. For example, Kant holds that making false promises is an absolute moral wrong. However, if we rely on the definition of a maxim as intention, we could argue that, if our intention is to save lives, making false promises is a morally justifiable action. This is obviously not how Kant would define a maxim. Onora O'Neill explains that the "maxim of an act or policy or activity is the underlying principle of the act,

29 Ibid., 338.
30 Ibid., 338.
31 Ibid., 338.
policy, or activity, by which other, more superficial aspects of action are guided.”

Rather than the intention motivating an action, a maxim is the underlying principle guiding the action. For our purposes, I would interpret what O'Neill means by principle as the rule on which we justify our acts. For example, to call back the false promises example, the maxim/principle would not merely be “saving lives” but something like “I will make false promises if it saves lives.” If we examine this statement as our maxim we can see how it would lead to a contradiction when universalized. If telling false promises to save lives were to become a universal law it would result in, to borrow language from Christine Korsgaard, a “practical contradiction.” The purpose for which we are making false promises is to save lives. However, if the maxim were universalized, it would no longer be able to produce the intended results. In order to be successful, a false promise must be believed. However, it cannot be believed if everyone knows that everyone will make false promises. Thus, “to have harmless fun” is not the maxim underlying action (A).

B. My Alternative Kantian Approach

For the purposes of this paper, I will follow O’Neill and Korsgaard’s understanding of Kantian maxims. I argue that applying the maxim underlying the act of driving a gas guzzler for fun to the universal law formulation of the categorical imperative results in a


35 Here I could also mention that this constitutes a “perfect duty towards others” but I find it irrelevant to our discussion here.
contradiction. Thus, this act is morally impermissible according to the Kantian Categorical Imperative. If I am successful then the Categorical Imperative is a defensible moral principle that gives us a moral obligation not to drive a gas guzzler for fun without relying on the premise that individual acts cause harm. This argument has three premises.

First, morally permissible actions conform with the formulation of the categorical imperative that states: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." Kant's language is notoriously difficult and thus requires careful reading. I interpret this statement to say that, when we perform any moral action, like driving in a gas guzzler for fun, the underlying principle or rule that we use to motivate that act must be constituted in a way that it could become a guiding principle for everyone in the world. This is a basic principle of Kantian moral philosophy. Kant's theory includes three formulations of what Kant saw as the same moral principle. For our purposes, we will focus on the first. This formulation, when applied, usually takes the form of a test for the morality of actions. You input the maxim of the action and consider if it could function as a universal law. I understand what Kant means by "universal law" as something similar to Newton's law of universal gravitation. For support, Kant makes the connection "Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the power to act according to his conception of laws, i.e., according to principles, and thereby has he a will".


37 Ibid., 412.
principles we abide by are similar to the laws that govern all of nature. The maxim would be a law that is always acting on everyone at all times in the same way that the force of gravity is always acting on everyone equally at all times. If this law does not result in a contradiction it is morally permissible.

Second, the maxim (defined as the underlying principle) of driving a gas-guzzler for fun is: “If I want to have an enjoyable experience, I will drive a gas guzzler SUV.” According to Christine Korsgaard, “Your maxim must contain your reason for action: it must say what you are going to do, and why.”38 What am I going to do? I will drive a gas guzzling SUV. Why do I choose to perform this action? It will be an enjoyable activity. The maxim is focused on the end goal at which my act is aimed and the means I have chosen to attain that goal. Notice how my maxim differs from Sinnott-Armstrong’s proposed maxim. Sinnott-Armstrong’s maxim of “to have harmless fun” does nothing to help us understand the relationship between the chosen act and the goal for which we perform that act. Essentially, Sinnott-Armstrong’s only tested the universalizability of the goal (or intention) of the action but ignores the act itself.

My third premise is that this maxim is not universalizable. There are several interpretations of what makes a maxim universalizable. Christine Korsgaard defends the Practical Contradiction Interpretation. Korsgaard explains this interpretation as “you cannot universalize because if the practice disappears it will of course no longer be efficacious in producing your purpose.”39 In other words, a maxim is not universalizable

if a world where that maxim is a universal law would inhibit your ability to practically achieve the ends for which you performed the action guided by that maxim. For example, the maxim for lying, if universalized, would make it practically impossible to lie. A world of liars is also a world where no one believes lies. The same goes for our maxim. In a world where everyone drove gas guzzler SUVs to have an enjoyable experience it would also be practically impossible to have an enjoyable experience driving an SUV. I come to this point based on the assumption that climate change would make the world less pleasant. Part of the joy in taking a Sunday drive in a gas guzzling SUV is enjoying the weather and the scenery. However, the results of climate change, which would result if everyone drove gas guzzling SUVs, would make that experience less enjoyable. Results like rising ocean levels, warmer temperatures, and more frequent and intense natural disasters would not make for an enjoyable experience. In other words, the universalization of this maxim would make the performance of the action pointless. It is not universalizable. Therefore, driving a gas-guzzler for fun is not morally permissible.

From this, we can see that Kant’s Categorical Imperative is a defensible moral principle that that gives us a moral obligation not to drive a gas guzzler for fun without relying on the premise that individual acts cause harm. In other words, Kant’s Categorical Imperative can assuage the X problem.

IV. POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS

To further support and clarify my argument, I will consider three potential objections to my Kantian argument.
First, one might object to my argument by accusing it of appealing to harm. I claimed that my Kantian alternative would not rely on the same flawed premise that I identified in the harm-based approaches, namely that it is not possible for an action to be harmful to the climate when performed often and by large groups but, in this instance, is only performed rarely and by a single individual and thus not harmful to the climate. In the justification of the second premise of my Kantian alternative, where I explain the reasoning behind my formulation of the underlying maxim of the act of driving a gas guzzler for fun, I mention that the moral actor is aware of the fact that if everyone drove a gas guzzler for fun it would cause harm. If this is the case, my alternative would be subject to the same objection I made to all the other harm-based approaches.

I would respond to this objection by pointing out that my alternative does not rely on a conception of harm because whether or not the act causes harm is not what makes it immoral. My alternative holds that what makes the act of driving a gas guzzler for fun morally impermissible is not that it causes harm but rather that the maxim motivating the act results in a contradiction. The benefit of the first formulation of the categorical imperative is that it helps to support the moral idea that, if an act is morally permissible, it is morally permissible regardless of the person performing that act. For Kant, the moral law is true for, and equally applies to, all people. To recognize this, one need only recall Kant’s formulation of the categorical imperative, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”40 The moral agent in Sinnott-Armstrong’s example would be making a special exception for

40 Immanuel Kant, Grounding, 412.
themselves in choosing to drive a gas guzzler for fun. Even if they only do it once and do not cause any harm, the act is wrong because what is moral or immoral in general is also moral or immoral for the individual.

Second, on a related note to the previous objection, one might object to my argument on the grounds that it is based on the considerations of consequences. In my justification for the second premise, I mention that the moral agent recognizes that if everyone drove a gas guzzler for fun it would contribute to climate change and cause harm. Kantian moral philosophy is opposed to the use of consequences in moral reasoning. If I appeal to the consequences of an action, how am I not a consequentialist?

In response, I would point out that my Kantian alternative does not argue that driving a gas guzzler for fun is morally impermissible by appealing to the consequences of that action. As I have tried to make clear in this paper, I agree with Sinnott-Armstrong that the one-time act of driving a gas guzzler for fun does not result in harmful consequences. For this reason, I recognize that we need an approach that does not take the consequences into consideration. Put simply, my argument is that driving a gas guzzler for fun is morally impermissible because it fails to conform to the moral law. I use Kant’s first formulation of the Categorical Imperative to show that the underlying maxim of the act results in a contradiction when universalized. Therefore, the maxim according to which the moral agent is acting is inconsistent with the moral law. I acknowledge that this argument is much less direct than an argument relying on the consequences of an action. However, that seems to be what is unique about this moral challenge.
Third, one might object to my Kantian alternative by arguing that the reasoning can also be construed as an appeal to moral integrity in a way that is similar to the arguments of Marion Hourdequin. The maxim that I identify as underlying the act of driving a gas guzzler for fun is contradictory because it cannot be universalized. How is this any different from arguing, as Hourdequin does, against the separation of individual and collective obligations?

In response, although I would acknowledge the similarities between Hourdequin’s argument and my own, both her appeal to integrity and my Kantian approach aim at maintaining a kind of internal consistency, there is still a subtle difference between the two. Hourdequin’s approach specifically focuses on the inconsistency between our individual and collective obligations. We cannot hold that we have these obligations on a collective level and ignore them on the individual level. For Kant’s ethics, our obligations as a collective and as an individual are only consistent because the collective is a group of individuals and the moral law equally applies to all individuals. Further, based on Hourdequin’s use of the Confucian relational-self, I understand her approach to opposed to the atomistic view of the individual in the Kantian approach. However, this aspect goes beyond the scope of this paper.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has provided a moral principle that gives a defensible argument for why driving a gas guzzler for fun is morally impermissible without relying on the premise that individual acts cause harm. It has done this in four parts. First, I analyzed Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument to isolate and formalize the X problem that moral
principles cannot explain why we should not drive gas guzzling SUVs for fun. Next, I have provided a characterization of the harm-based approach which wrongly assumes an individual act like driving a gas guzzler is harmful in itself. Then, I have provided an alternative response using Kantian moral philosophy to explain that Kantian moral principles can explain why it is wrong to drive a gas guzzling SUV. Finally, I have considered some potential objections to my approach before concluding.

I would like to end by acknowledging that I do not hold that my Kantian alternative is the only potential response to the moral problem discussed in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s paper. It may not even be the best response. I stress the fact that I find this problem regarding individual obligations and climate change to be a unique kind of moral challenge that our past and current approaches to the assignment of moral obligation and responsibility may struggle to address. I believe that despite the long history of moral and ethical thought we still have far to go.
Works Cited


