

## Kant, Individual Responsibility, and Climate Change

In “Climate Change and Individual Duties,” Baatz draws on two important features of Kant’s moral philosophy, his principle that “ought implies can” and his distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. For Baatz, morality is *intrinsically* limited by what can be reasonably demanded of a person, since this is built into the principle that ought implies can. Imperfect duties are cases where this intrinsic limitation is made more acute due to epistemic limitations regarding what sorts of demands are truly reasonable. For Kant, however, there is no intrinsic “reasonable demand” limitation within morality itself; if someone has a moral obligation, they have it regardless of danger to their well-being. Only because some obligations (imperfect duties) are directly only about adopting various ends (such as the happiness of others) can Kant alleviate the stringency of these obligations, and he does so differently than Baatz. I close my discussion of these differences with two questions, first, whether Kant’s flexibility regarding imperfect duties is helpful when applied to GHG emissions, and second, whether we should rethink some environmental obligations, seeing them as perfect duties.

Baatz’s use of “ought implies can” focuses on the high cost (not literal impossibility<sup>1</sup>) of individuals contributing to a decrease in overall GHG emissions. In discussing the principle, he asks,

But what does ‘can’ precisely mean...? [I]ndividuals are cognitively and physically able to substantially lower their current high emissions. Therefore, do individuals have to take these steps and give up their current life? What can morality reasonably demand? ... [M]orality should not demand that individuals lower their emissions to a level so as to give up leading a decent life. This intuition is acknowledged by the prevalent term ‘subsistence emissions’ and not in need of justification. (17)

Baatz “[c]onsider[s] an (elderly) person living in a rural area in the US who depends on her car” and argues that her car use could count as “subsistence emissions” (18) that one cannot – and therefore need not – give up. Baatz<sup>2</sup> uses “ought implies can” to argue *from* human possibilities (or the lack thereof) *to* moral obligations (or the lack thereof).

By contrast, *Kant* introduces the ought-implies-can principle for the opposite purpose. His most famous statement of it arises after a pair of hypothetical scenarios presented to one who “asserts of his lustful inclination that ... it is quite irresistible.” In the first, “a gallows [is] erected ... and he w[ill] be hanged on it immediately after gratifying his lust” and in the second, “his prince demand[s], on pain of the same immediate execution, that he give false testimony against an honorable man.” With respect to the latter case, Kant says,

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<sup>1</sup> Baatz takes the principle from Seager et. al., who use the principle to call into question an individual obligation to reduce emissions given skepticism about whether “individuals can realistically reduce [global] climate emissions” when individual reductions can “incentiviz[e] others to increase their emissions” (Seager et. al. 2011, 40). Baatz seems to think Seager’s game theoretic considerations are not sufficient to justify the claim that individual GHG reductions will not in at least some small way reduce global GHG levels (5), so for Baatz, it’s not literally impossible for individuals to reduce global GHG.

<sup>2</sup> Seager uses the principle in the same way.

He would perhaps not venture to assert whether he would do it or not, but he must admit without hesitation that it would be possible for him. He judges, therefore, that he can do something because he is aware that he ought to do it. (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:30)

Kant here reasons *from* ought to can, not vice versa. That one has an obligation proves that one has the capacity for fulfilling that obligation, even without confidence about what one *would* do. Moral obligations cannot be excused due to difficulties in fulfilling them; that one recognizes that one *has* a duty shows that there is a way, however difficult, of fulfilling that duty. Even if it requires giving up one's *life*, one "can" choose to do so precisely *because* one *ought* to. Particularly for that "perfect moral storm" (Gardiner 2004) of global warming ethics, Kant's point is that we must *first* settle the moral issue of what is required, and *then* figure out the best (most practical, least painful) ways of fulfilling that obligation; we cannot first focus on what is "doable" as a way of discerning what is required.<sup>3</sup>

From a Kantian perspective, Baatz is wrong to see "reasonable demands" as limiting moral obligation *as such*. This makes his turn to the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties even more important than he suggests in his article. In Kant's example, one must sacrifice one's life rather than violate *perfect* duties by giving false testimony to destroy an innocent person. Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect duty plays a central role in Baatz's argument, as he (with Johnson) argues that "individual GHG reductions are an imperfect duty *sensu* Kant" (20-21), but (against Johnson) "caution[s] against a too generous interpretation of Kantian imperfect duties" (21). In particular, Baatz insists that "the exact amount that is owed ... is left to the judgment (*not the convenience* [emphasis added]) of the individual" because of "insurmountable epistemic obstacles" (21). For Kant, however, individual convenience *can* be part of how one judges what to do about imperfect duties because such duties are not merely *epistemically* indeterminate but, with respect to action, *intrinsically* indeterminate. First, then, Kant contrasts perfect and imperfect duties in *Groundwork* by explaining that only a perfect duty "admits no exception in favor of inclination" (4:422n); when fulfilling an imperfect duty, by contrast, one decides, at least partly, based on (inclinal) convenience. For instance, one has an imperfect duty to perfect one's talents, which one can fulfill through learning dance, doing memory exercises, or working on advanced mathematics. Advanced math fits well with some people's natural interests and doesn't require the inconvenience and awkwardness of finding a dance partner. Others prefer dance because it can be done with friends. Some might even decide they've had enough self-cultivation for the day and just veg in front of the TV. All these choices are permissible.

Relatedly, imperfect duties' indeterminacy is not a matter of *epistemic* difficulty but arises because imperfect duties specify *ends* rather than *actions*: "[imperfect] duty has in it latitude for doing more or less, and no specific limits can be assigned to what should be done [because t]he law holds only for maxims, not for determinate actions" (*Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:393). Kant's reference to "maxims, not...actions" is explained elsewhere in terms of "the concept of an *end* that is also a duty" (6:389).

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<sup>3</sup> For much more detailed explications of this point, see Kant's *Perpetual Peace* and *On the Common Saying*, "That may be correct in theory, but is of no use in practice" both included in *Practical Philosophy* (ed. Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Imperfect duties require not that one do this or that, but that one act in such a way that others' happiness (6:387) is one of one's ends, or better, that one does not make it one's maxim to utterly disregard the ends of others (4:424-5,430). This conception of imperfect duties as requiring ends rather than actions helps redeem some of Baatz's key points. There are epistemic challenges, since no action can ever clearly show what a person's ends are, so (at most) only the person herself can discern whether she really acts with others' happiness in mind. And the requirement that one make others' happiness an end leaves room for the notion of subsistence levels of GHG emissions; it can hardly be said of one who voluntarily limits her emissions to subsistence level that she fails to value the happiness of others.

But once we understand what imperfect duties are, there might seem to be *too much* flexibility regarding individual limitation of GHG emissions. If limiting GHG emissions is an imperfect duty, not only are the specific *actions* – driving the car less, limiting water use, avoiding GHG-intensive agricultural products, and so on – not directly required, but even limiting GHG emissions as such is required only indirectly. People have obligations not to ignore others' happiness. Insofar as limiting GHG emissions promotes such happiness, we should limit GHG emissions. But the "should" here is very modest, akin to saying that we "should" learn dance or advanced mathematics. We need not make others' well-being our supreme end, and there are many ways of showing that we value it. One may take SUV joy rides only if such rides are consistent with making others' welfare one's end. But it is all-too-easy, and all-too-common, to do just that. I take a couple friends who also love SUV-joy-riding, read *Nature Conservancy* magazine while filling the SUV with gas, and give a dollar to a panhandler along the way. No one could claim I've not made others' welfare my end. But these gestures, even if reflecting genuine ends and doing real good, are hardly sufficient to solve – or even meaningfully impact – problems caused by GHG emissions.

Kant's moral theory has significant advantages over Baatz's. It acknowledges genuine (not merely epistemic) indeterminacy in moral life and allows some obligations (imperfect ones) to be balanced against nonmoral concerns as part of an overall assessment of living life well, all-the-while insisting that strict moral obligations cannot be avoided by claims about what is "reasonable to demand." But for global climate change, Kant's theory seems to let individuals off the hook too easily. One solution here would be to ramp up his notion of imperfect duty, such that I have an obligation not merely to make others' happiness my end, but to make it my end to promote the happiness of others as much as I (would) rely on them to promote my own. There is a plausible basis for this expanded duty in *Groundwork* (4:423-4), and it would require more stringent (perhaps too stringent?) limits on personal GHG emissions. Alternatively, one might turn to other aspects of Kant's moral theory – particularly the perfect duties embodied in his philosophy of right – to argue for *perfect* duties with respect to GHG emissions, conceiving of the use of more than one's fair share as a kind of *theft*, rather than a failure of charity. Given the nature of Kant's ought-implies-can principle, this might impose burdens that go far beyond what Baatz seeks, since it would require going so far as to give up even subsistence level GHG emissions to "return" what one has "stolen." But taking Kant's political theory even more seriously (particularly 6:350), one might reasonably argue that in addition to imperfect personal duties to reduce emissions, one has a duty to promote a *political* end, a just international political order within which improper levels of GHG emissions would be a clear *and enforceable* perfect duty.