

# Why leave the car at home, if that doesn't save the climate?

## A consequence-based approach

Adriano Mannino, Nov. 2019

Why should one take individual action against collectively caused evils such as climate change? *Prima facie*, one's individual contribution seems to make a negligible difference at best. Consequentialists as well as consequence-sensitive nonconsequentialists should be interested in whether a consequence-based justification for leaving one's car at home can be found nonetheless. Nonconsequentialists, too, may hold that a – or the – central reason for leaving one's car at home is to make a worthwhile difference to the climate. Unfortunately, though, the consequence-based justifications that have been offered are unsatisfactory or incomplete. I aim to help remedy this problem. The consequence-based approach I sketch comprises three main points.

1. Individuals may be able to make a worthwhile difference *in expectation*, at least with sufficiently large sets of acts (of driving, say). A set of environmentally unfriendly acts may have some probability to cause, say, one additional deadly storm in the future. Even if said probability is tiny, the large associated stakes may still yield an expected value that's worthwhile for an individual to create. Moreover, it can be shown that non-zero expected values result for an individual's acts even when, holding everyone else's acts fixed, the difference the individual makes is literally imperceptible. This is because, *ex ante*, one does not know exactly how many others will contribute to the collectively caused harm. If individually imperceptible contributions are to aggregate to form a perceptible harm, there must be (relative) perceptibility thresholds that one's own contribution is non-zero likely to cross.

2. However, even if climate-friendly acts come with non-zero altruistic expected value, we face a problem. The altruistic expected value may be so tiny as to be *insufficiently worthwhile* to each agent involved. I argue that in such cases, a Prisoner's Dilemma (PD) stands in the way of the agents making a worthwhile difference. It is well-known that PDs or public goods problems arise in climate contexts, but they are thought to result from the interaction of agents pursuing egoistic goals. Crucially, however, PDs can also arise among agents who are *altruistically* concerned with the climate – there are altruistic public goods and respective games. I show that by cooperating in the PD the agents face, they could each achieve an altruistic expected value that's worthwhile.

3. Thus, the question remains whether the one-shot PD – iteration won't save us – can be solved in a consequence-based way. So-called evidential decision theorists have tended to believe this to be the case. Causal decision theorists have been skeptical, but some have recently changed their mind. This constitutes higher-order evidence for reckoning with the possibility that the PD can ultimately be solved in a consequence-based way. We should, of course, be far from certain in this, which raises the question of how to hedge against our decision-theoretic uncertainty. Because the climate stakes we could influence via mutual cooperation are very large indeed, it makes practical sense to bet on cooperation being justifiable based on consequences, and to act accordingly.