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Offsetting Risks to the Unjustly Advantaged: Why Doing More Good Sometimes Takes Priority Over Offsetting Risks We've Unjustly Imposed

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Stefánsson's (2022) central claim is that we have stronger moral reasons to direct resources to charitable organizations like those recommended by GiveWell than we have to use the same resources to offset our greenhouse gas emissions. The main reason why this is the case, on his view, is that offsetting our emissions will not reduce the climate change-related risks faced by the very same people who face increased risks as a result of our emissions. Offsetting, then, is not a way of ensuring that we avoid wrongfully imposing additional risks on particular people through our emitting activity – instead, it at best reduces the risks faced by different people. And since the amount of good done by reducing risks through offsetting is so much lower than the amount of good done by donating the same resources to an effective charity, the moral reasons to do the latter are much stronger than the moral reasons to offset.

This argument is, it seems to me, compelling. My main aim in this comment, therefore, is not to challenge the argument, but instead to suggest that the range of cases in which there are stronger moral reasons to donate to effective charities than there are to offset risks that one has unjustly imposed includes at least some cases in which one could offset the risks faced by the very individuals whom one has unjustly subjected to increased risks. This may seem like a difficult conclusion to accept – after all, it involves denying that reasons to compensate those whom one has personally wronged should necessarily take priority over much more impersonal reasons to benefit anyone in need. I will argue, however, that even if we accept that the claims of

those who have been wronged to compensation from those who have wronged them are, generally speaking, quite weighty, in at least some cases individuals' claims to compensation from a limited pool of resources that could do much more good elsewhere are weakened by the fact that they are, even after being wronged, unjustly advantaged all things considered. And in at least some of these cases, their claims are, I will argue, outweighed by the reasons to do more good.

Consider the following case: Jennifer drives a vehicle that runs on a type of fuel that causes no greenhouse gas emissions, but does cause emissions of a mildly carcinogenic gas. This gas has been shown to increase the risk to those who are exposed of developing certain cancers. Because the gas particles travel slowly and break down quickly, the exposure radius from the site of emissions from vehicles is quite small – no more than one quarter of a mile. Jennifer does not drive much, but she occasionally enjoys going for an aimless drive in order to relax and clear her head. When she does drive, she takes a route that avoids large concentrations of people, but this means driving through a wealthy neighborhood with a few dozen houses within a quarter mile radius of her route. Over the past year, she has driven through the neighborhood five times, which is estimated to cause an increase in cancer risk to each resident of approximately one one-hundredth of one percent. Despite Jennifer's emissions in their neighborhood, the residents all enjoy much lower overall exposure to the type of gas released by her car than most other members of society, as well as a wide range of other advantages that they would not enjoy if their society were just. They enjoy greater life expectancy than most, have significantly more income and wealth, have greater access to free time and valuable activities, and so on.

Despite the fact that they remain quite well off overall, it is, I take it, clear that Jennifer wrongs the residents of the wealthy neighborhood by driving near their homes.[1] She exposes

them to an increased risk of cancer, and has no plausible justification for doing so. They have legitimate grounds for objecting to her driving, and she has no reasons to offer in her defense that they ought to accept. In Stefánsson's terms (adopted from Broome), she has violated her duty of justice not to harm or risk harming them without a sufficiently strong reason.

Now imagine that Jennifer could offset the risks that she has imposed on those in the wealthy neighborhood by removing as many particles of the gas from the area as her driving has released. This would cost $1,000, and would make it the case that the set of her driving and offsetting actions together imposed no additional risk of cancer on the residents of the neighborhood. If she does not offset the risks that she has imposed on the residents, she could instead remove the same number of particles of the gas from a much poorer neighborhood, where the overall rate of exposure is significantly higher, or she could donate the $1,000 to a malaria charity recommended by GiveWell.

It is, in my view, implausible to think that Jennifer has stronger reasons to use limited resources to offset the risks that she has unjustly imposed on the residents of the wealthy neighborhood than she has to do much more good by, for example, benefitting those who are unjustly disadvantaged all things considered in her own society, or contributing to saving lives threatened by malaria in poor countries. The fact that those whom she has wronged are, and remain even after her wrongful imposition of risk on them, unjustly advantaged, seems to me to weaken their claim to have limited resources directed toward compensating them rather than in ways that will do more good and/or reduce injustice overall.

Importantly, accepting this view does not require denying that those who wrong people have distinctive reasons to remedy the wrongs that they have done. It merely requires accepting that these reasons can sometimes be outweighed, for example by broader facts about the unjust

distribution of benefits and burdens, or by facts about how much more good limited resources could do if directed in alternative ways. It also does not require denying that those who wrong particular people will generally have obligations to those whom they have wronged that remain despite the fact that they ought to direct limited resources toward things other than offsetting the effects of their wrongdoing. For example, Jennifer is plausibly obligated to apologize to the residents of the neighborhood for wrongfully increasing their risk of developing cancer, even if she ought to direct resources toward doing more good rather than offsetting those risks.

Cases like the one that I have discussed suggest, it seems to me, that it is not only the impossibility of offsetting risks to the very individuals on whom one has wrongfully imposed risks that can undermine the requirement to offset and make it the case that one ought to do more good instead. If I am right, then broader facts about the distribution of benefits and burdens, the justice or injustice of that distribution, and also facts about where resources would do the most good, are always relevant to how limited resources ought to be deployed by those who have wronged particular others and therefore have at least fairly weighty reasons to compensate them. And when those whom one has wronged are, all things considered, beneficiaries of prevailing injustice, it will at least often be the case that the reasons to direct limited resources to compensating them are outweighed by the reasons to direct those resources elsewhere, where they will, for example, mitigate injustice and/or do much more good.

On reflection, this view should, I think, seem more plausible than it may initially appear. One reason for this is that it would seem inappropriate, at least in certain cases, for those who have been wronged, but remain unjustly advantaged overall, to complain about the wrongdoer directing limited resources toward promoting justice rather than compensating them. Imagine that Jennifer directs the $1,000 that would be required to offset the risks to those in the wealthy

community to removing particles of the gas in a poor community, where exposure rates, and cancer rates, are 25 times as high as they are in the wealthy community. Are we really willing to accept that those in the wealthy community would be justified in complaining that she did not remove gas particles in their community instead? If we think, as I do, that this complaint would be unjustified, then we are committed to accepting that sometimes wrongdoers ought to do more good rather than offsetting, even if they could offset risks that they imposed on particular people.

Note

[1] I follow Stefánsson (2022, p. X) in taking the emitting activity in my example as given, and asking what we should think about whether one should offset or do more good, holding that emitting activity fixed.

Reference

Stefánsson, H.O. (2022). Should I offset or should I do more good? *Ethics, Policy & Environment, X(X)*, X-X.