

# Non-Instrumental Solutions to the Inefficacy Problem

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## **Abstract**

This chapter provides an overview of non-instrumental solutions to the inefficacy problem. According to these solutions, you should act, even if it is instrumentally insignificant, for the following reasons: you should not participate in the group that is causing the collective harm (participation), or you should act in accordance with your concerns (integrity), or you should make a statement in support of the victims of the collective harm (expression), or you should do your fair share of a collective task to avoid the collective harm (fairness). The chapter discusses whether these approaches have the resources to respond to a set of challenges: the superfluity problem, the disconnect problem, the significance problem, and the problem of open cases.

*In The Ethics of Inefficacy*  
(Routledge 2026)

## 1. Introduction

Let us revisit Parfit's case:

### *Drops of Water*

A large number of wounded men lie in the desert, suffering from intense thirst. Others – including you – have a pint of water, and could pour their pints into a water cart. After you and the others decide whether to add your pints, the cart would be driven into the desert and the water would be divided equally among the wounded. By adding your pint, you would allow each wounded man to drink a little more water – one drop at most. Even for a very thirsty man, one extra drop makes no difference.<sup>1</sup>

Do you have a reason to donate your pint if it makes no difference to the suffering of the wounded? You might think: "It makes no difference whether I do it or not, so I have no reason to do it." But if everyone thinks and acts like that, the wounded men will not be helped.

People should donate their pints because *together* they can help the wounded men. But why would you individually have a reason to do this if your contribution makes no difference? Either enough people are already donating, and your donation is a waste. Or too many do not donate, and, again, your donation is a waste. The victims suffer in exactly the same way whether you act one way or another. The challenge is to find reasons to donate your pint even if your contribution makes no relevant difference.

Two very different approaches have been developed in the debate: instrumental and non-instrumental. Importantly, instrumental significance is not to be understood simply as doing one's share of what is collectively significant, or as doing "the sort of thing that if enough of us do it, will prevent the harm of concern" (Nefsky 2023: 52). If you adopt this thin conception, and maintain that people are individually instrumentally "significant" in this thin sense, then everyone in the debate can agree that people can be "significant" in this way.

Instead, you are instrumentally significant if you can influence the outcome – the victim's situation – in a relevant way (Nefsky 2023: 40). In contrast, non-instrumental approaches start from the assumption that your influence in Drops of Water and real-life analogs is negligible. Many collective harms are too large, and your individual contribution too small. Your influence on what is happening may not be significant enough. Non-instrumental approaches ask: *when we are instrumentally insignificant, could there still be reasons for action?* This chapter provides an overview of these alternative reasons.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Parfit (1984: 76). The assumption is that you cannot make a difference. If you think that a drop could make a difference, then assume the men just get a molecule of your pint. The case has been widely discussed, and for our purposes we do not need to go into further detail here.

<sup>2</sup> See Gunnemyr and Van Oeveren (2026) for an overview of instrumental reasons.

A few things before we begin. In principle, different approaches would be compatible. You could have both instrumental and non-instrumental reasons for donating your pint, namely when doing so is both instrumentally and non-instrumentally significant. In cases where there are no instrumental reasons for action, there may still be non-instrumental reasons. However, Julia Nefsky argues that non-instrumental reasons do not work if your actions lack instrumental significance (section 2). Therefore, we will examine this carefully in this chapter.

Importantly, we will bracket *all* instrumental significance in this chapter. You may think that lack of integrity is bad because it impairs your ability to persuade others. Or that unfairness is bad because it demotivates others to do their share. Or that making statements is good because it motivates others to do their share. For the purposes of this chapter, we will assume that not only is your direct impact on the victim's situation insignificant, but also your indirect impact through other people. It is highly unlikely, or so we assume, that you will be able to motivate enough others to take action, i.e., in such a way that victims will benefit.<sup>3</sup>

If we bracket all that, *what's left?* Non-instrumental reasons, too, will be about the outcome of everyone's conduct: the collective harm suffered by the victims. But these reasons are not about influencing it, but about something else. What reasons for action could there be that do not concern one's impact on the collective harm? As I see it, possible answers can be found in three different directions:

*Self-regarding reasons*

You should act to gain certain benefits for yourself, such as avoiding blame for the collective harm.

*Victim-regarding reasons*

You should act because it shows support for, or avoids offending, the victims of the collective harm.

*Others-regarding reasons*

You should act because other people are doing, or should be doing, their share to avoid the collective harm too.

These reasons differ in where the value is found. You are either acting for yourself, for victims, or for others. As we will see, non-instrumental proposals can fall into one or more of these categories.

Several non-instrumental accounts are attitude-based. They start with certain attitudes of the agent – her concerns, beliefs, desires, intentions, etc. regarding the collective harm – and try to generate reasons for action from these attitudes. For example, you may act out of concern for the victims, as integrity accounts say. This forms a clear difference with instrumental accounts which look at the action's impact rather than the attitudes behind the action.

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<sup>3</sup> We will also assume that broader lifestyle choices are instrumentally insignificant, e.g., that choosing to be vegan *for life* does nothing to reduce animal suffering in factory farms.

The focus will be on recent developments after Nefsky's (2019) overview. Nefsky (2019: section 3) discussed the following non-instrumental accounts: participation, complicity, fairness, and expression. I will follow this except that I will not treat complicity as a separate category,<sup>4</sup> and add integrity as a fourth category. Integrity is about acting in line with your *own* concerns, while expression is about signalling statements to *others*, and how they, in turn, interpret your attitudes.

My approach will be constructive. It is important to acknowledge the challenges that non-instrumental solutions face, but I will also look for possible answers. The central goal is to review how far we have come in the debate, and to identify open issues for future work. In this way, I will provide an overview of the current non-instrumental landscape. My overview will be opinionated: I will be evaluating existing proposals and adding some original ideas here and there.

## 2. Nefsky's challenges

Nefsky has posed difficult challenges to non-instrumental approaches: the Superfluity Problem and the Disconnect Problem.<sup>5</sup> Consider a second case:

### *Sips of Water*

A large number of wounded men lie in the desert next to a large, sealed water tank intended for their survival. Others – including you – have a siphon. You could choose to take a single sip of water from the tank through the siphon system. By taking a sip, you would remove a minuscule amount of water. For each wounded man, the reduction of a single drop from his share would make no difference to his suffering, though everyone's sips would leave the tank nearly empty.

In this case, it is not just that the wounded men are not benefited (as in Drops of Water), but that they are harmed. Just as we look for reasons to donate your pint in Drops of Water, we look for reasons not to take sips in Sips of Water. The Superfluity Problem is that the proposed reason for action should not be undermined by the "superfluity" or instrumental insignificance of the action. Take the following account:

### *Participation*

You should not take a sip because you should not participate in the group that harms the wounded men.

This account is inspired by some of Parfit's ideas. He wrote: "It is not enough to ask, 'Will my act harm other people?' Even if the answer is No, my act may still be

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<sup>4</sup> Complicity can be explicated along the lines of participation or expression (discussed below), or instrumental significance (when you contribute in a relevant way to someone else's wrongdoing).

<sup>5</sup> Nefsky presented these in her seminal (2015) paper, and developed them further in (2018, 2023). Wieland and Van Oeveren distinguish these problems in (2020: 167).

wrong... I should ask, ‘Will my act be one of a set of acts that will *together* harm other people?’” (1984: 86)<sup>6</sup>

In terms of this account, the Superfluity Problem is the question: why should you be counted as a participant in the group that harms the wounded? You take a sip from the tank, but the assumption is that this is instrumentally insignificant and does not affect the victims in any relevant way. Given this, why would you be part of the group that harms them? The challenge is to explain group membership in some non-instrumental way.

Note that these groups are unorganized. Members do not act with any intention to do their part in some group project (Kutz 2000: ch. 6). In Sips of Water, we do not take sips *in order to* harm the wounded men. We also do not take sips to empty the tank. We just sip because it gives us a small benefit. Hence, group membership is not easily explained by people’s intentions.

The Disconnect Problem, in turn, is that you can also participate in alternative or “disconnected” ways. In Drops of Water, you might think: why add my pint? Why not just applaud from the sidelines? If donating your pint is not helpful, it is not clear how this action would make you a participant in the group that benefits the wounded any more than applauding from the sidelines would. The problem is that we are not interested in reasons to merely applaud from the sidelines. If people just applaud but do not donate their pints, the wounded will not be helped. Instead, we need reasons *to specifically donate our pints*. More generally, we need reasons to “do the sort of thing that if enough of us do it, will prevent the harm of concern” (Nefsky 2023: 52).

I am discussing two cases here, as the Superfluity Problem is most easily explained using collective harm cases (as Sips of Water), and the Disconnect Problem using collective benefit cases (as Drops of Water). In collective benefit cases, it is easier to explain membership in terms of intentions (Nefsky 2015: 251). You all donate with the intention to help the wounded men. However, the Superfluity Problem can still occur. After all, you might ask yourself: should I donate my pint if it is insignificant?

In collective harm cases, in turn, it is easier to explain that you have reason not to sip. The thought is that you just do not get involved in the problem. However, the Disconnect Problem may still occur. Why not wear a T-shirt that says “I am Raising Awareness for the Wounded Men!” *when you sip from the tank*, as long as sipping is insignificant?

These two problems affect non-instrumental accounts in general (see Table 1).

	<i>Superfluity Problem</i>	<i>Disconnect Problem</i>
Participation	Why do I count as a participant if my action is insignificant?	I can also participate in disconnected ways.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular Parfit’s “C7” principle (1984: 70). He also made suggestions that go in another direction (involving imperceptible harms). Participation-based reasons bear similarities to the pattern-based reasons discussed by Woodard (2008) and Dietz (2023).

Integrity	Why do I compromise my integrity if my action is insignificant?	I can also act in line with my concern in disconnected ways.
Expression	If my action is insignificant, why would it express indifference?	I can also express support in disconnected ways.
Fairness	If my action is insignificant, why would it count as doing my fair share?	I can also be fair in disconnected ways.

Table 1: Overview challenges

According to Nefsky, the Superfluity Problem and the Disconnect Problem can be solved, but by maintaining that your individual action *is* instrumentally significant after all. If stopping sipping would be helpful, then *that* could explain why refusing to stop makes you part of the group that harms the wounded men. Or, if donating your pint would influence the outcome in a significant way, then *that* could explain why you have reason to do specifically that action rather than only applaud from the sidelines.

This would mean that non-instrumental accounts presuppose an instrumental solution. They will not work on their own, and may even be redundant. If we already have instrumental reasons not to sip and to donate, it is unclear why would we need any *further* non-instrumental reasons for these actions. The challenge for non-instrumental accounts is to see whether such instrumental assumptions are really needed, or whether there are alternative – non-instrumental – responses to the two problems.

I will also address, what may be called, the “Significance Problem.” We are not only interested in possible reasons to donate your pint, but also in how important it is to do so. What is so valuable about donating your pint when there are other things you could be doing with your time and resources?<sup>7</sup> We will see that non-instrumental accounts are designed to say something about this. What is valuable about doing something that is instrumentally insignificant? You are acting out of integrity, or to support the victims, or to be fair.

A summary of what is to come can be found in Table 2.

	<i>Superfluity Problem</i>	<i>Disconnect Problem</i>	<i>Significance Problem</i>
Participation	Solvable	Solvable	Hard problem
Integrity	Hard problem	Solvable	Solvable
Expression	Solvable	Hard problem	Solvable
Fairness	Solvable	Solvable	Solvable

Table 2: Overview chapter

<sup>7</sup> In Wieland et al. (2026), we describe this problem in terms of strength of reasons rather than value.

“Solvable” in Table 2 means: we will see that potential answers are available (i.e., without using instrumental assumptions). Yet that does not mean, for sure, that they are not controversial, or that subsequent challenges will not arise. (Indeed, who would expect otherwise in our field.)

“Hard problem” means: we will not see answers (at most some rough ideas). Yet that does not mean that the given problems are unsolvable. (Indeed, hardly anything in philosophy is.)

As can be seen in Table 2, currently fairness reasons seem to have the upper hand. This is not to say that they are better reasons. The implication is that the proponents of the other approaches have more work to do.

### 3. Participation

The Superfluity Problem: why does sipping make you a participant in the group that harms the wounded men? As we saw, it is not easy to explain this on the basis of people’s attitudes. Tank sippers might not care too much about the wounded men – but more about themselves – and you might think that that is something that unites them. But there may be (selected) people who do care, and who only sip because it is instrumentally insignificant.

An alternative proposal to explain participation is in terms of the “underlying dimension” criterion (Wieland and Van Oeveren 2020, using a concept from Kagan 2011: 117). If you donate your pint, you are a participant in the group that helps the men because you “add” to the underlying dimension of “water in the cart.” If you sip, you are a participant in the group that harms the men because you “subtract” from the underlying dimension of “water in the tank.”

The idea is not that you influence the victims’ situation in any relevant way. Instead, the account has two steps. First, you can change the underlying dimension. You cannot make a difference to the wounded men, but you can make a (tiny) difference to the water in the cart. Second, if enough people change the underlying dimension, then the latter will make a difference to the wounded men. Enough donations could solve their problem.<sup>8</sup>

While this may explain group membership, the Disconnect Problem looms. If what matters is participation, and if you participate by adding to the underlying dimension, then why not just add a drop of water to the cart instead of your full pint (Nefsky 2023: 52)? Again, both are considered instrumentally insignificant, and we cannot say that adding a full pint would benefit the victims more. Also, such a claim would make participation redundant. We could just say that you should add your pint because that is instrumentally significant – regardless of what the group does – while adding a drop is not. The problem is that if everyone gives just one drop, the men will not be helped. There will not be enough people

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<sup>8</sup> See Nefsky (2023) for counterexamples to this solution, and Van Oeveren and Wieland (2024) for an updated proposal.

with drops to help the wounded men. If this is the case, we specifically need reasons to donate full pints.

A first answer is that just as you have a participation-based reason to add a drop, you also have the same reason to add the rest of the pint. Your further drops, too, will add to the underlying dimension (Van Oeveren and Wieland 2024). The question, however, is why there is reason to participate more if there is no instrumental reason to do so. Could there be a non-instrumental reason to participate more?

One idea is that you have no reason to participate in groups that make no difference, and help no one (Van Oeveren and Wieland 2024). If the group of people with drops cannot help the wounded men, you have no reason to join them. However, if everyone has a full pint, and the group *can* make a difference, the question remains why you should add more than a drop.

Proponents of instrumental accounts might say that you are to blame if you fail to do something – donate a full pint – that would be instrumentally significant. You refuse to do something helpful for the wounded men if you merely add a drop, and that is why you deserve blame.

A contrasting non-instrumental explanation might be the following. If you donate a drop, you participate in the group that tried to help the wounded men, but if you keep the rest of your pint, you *also* seem to participate in the group that failed to help. If there could be such an account of participation in groups that fail to help, then you, too, are to blame for the men's suffering. You have reason to donate your full pint, then, to avoid such blame.

The Disconnect Problem seems to be less pressing in collective harm cases. If you should not participate in the group that harms the wounded men, then you should not take a big sip or a small one. You simply have reason not to participate at all.

Let us turn to the Significance Problem. Even if you participate in groups that cause harm (given some account), why would this matter if your participation is insignificant? Your participation makes no difference to the given harm, so why would your participation be problematic? Note that if your participation made the harm significantly worse, we would not need a participation account. We could just say that you should act because you should not make the harm significantly worse. Yet, you make no such difference.

This problem is not explicitly labelled by Nefsky, but she describes it here: "We need to know why being part of a group is morally significant. Given that your act makes no difference to what the group does, why does the identified form of membership make your act wrong?" (2019: 3)

Generally, answers to the Significance Problem can be found in three different directions. Your participation might be bad for yourself, for the victims, or for other people. I will start with the first answer, and discuss the other answers in subsequent sections.

Participation in groups that harm (or fail to benefit) could be bad for yourself. It may tell something – something bad – about you. It tells: you are one of those that caused the collective harm. Even when you make no difference, if you sip from the tank, and too many others do the same, you will be one of those who empty the tank and leave the men to die. Real-life analogs: “If you buy sweatshop and animal products, you are part of the group that sustains exploitation and animal suffering. *You are one of them*. You are *not* one of them, and you avoid membership in such groups when you boycott.” (Wieland and Van Oeveren 2020: 164)

Intuitively, you do not want to be part of these groups. If you were to participate, you would be complicit, have “dirty hands,” or be “tainted” (Appiah 1986). But why is this a problem if you are not making the harms any worse?

This may be a problem for *you*. First, you may feel guilty, and by avoiding participation you could avoid that feeling. If you refrain from sipping, and cannot save the men in any other way (as we assume), the victims’ predicament is not on you. Second, you could avoid criticism and blame for the situation from others (Schmidt 2025). Third, you could avoid remedial responsibility (Barry 2019). When we ask who should pay for a new water tank for the men in the desert, we look first to those who emptied it. Finally, by not participating you can avoid sending problematic messages:

“When you [sip when too many others also sip], you know you are joining a group that will cause harm. By doing this, you do not distance yourself from its members and the harm they cause. That is, you become one of the people who [empty the tank]. What does this say about you? It says that you are willing to be a person who together with others causes harm. In this way, you display indifference.” (Wieland 2022: 48)

Exactly what message would be displayed? First: that you are willing to be a person who together with others harms the wounded men. Second: that the harm done to the wounded men is not important to you. You say to the world: “I do not care enough about them.” But why would you send this latter message if your participation does not make the harm any worse? First, others may still interpret the message as such if you sip (or keep your pint) even when you think that you care. Second, the whole group (of sippers) *does* negatively affect the wounded men. Even when people might not think that you individually do not care enough (when they realize that your participation is insignificant), they will still think the whole group does not care enough. And it is still bad to belong to such groups.

The subsequent question is *how* bad this is. If you signal that the collective harm is not important to you (collectively and/or individually), is that more than slightly bad for you? This is the Significance Problem.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Your sign of indifference can also be bad for the wounded men. Such considerations are victim-regarding, and no longer self-regarding, and I will turn to them in section 5.

#### 4. Integrity

A second account:

*Integrity*

You should not take a sip because you should act out of integrity, that is, in accordance with your concern for the wounded men.

Before discussing how this might work for collective harms, let us consider the following variant:

A large number of wounded men lie in the desert next to a large, sealed water tank intended for their survival. You could choose to empty the tank all by yourself. You know that, if you would not do this, some bandits would do it in your place, and the wounded men would die all the same.

Why might it be problematic to empty the tank, even when the outcome is exactly the same? Answer: your integrity. Williams said: "Each of us especially responsible for what *he* does rather than what other people do." (1973: 99)

Similarly, why might it be problematic in Sips of Water to participate in the group that harms the wounded men, when the outcome is exactly the same? Again: your integrity. You are responsible for what you do. Not for what other people do.

Still, there is an important difference between the two cases. If you sip from the tank instead of emptying the whole tank, you are taken to be instrumentally insignificant (i.e., do not influence the victims' situation in a relevant way). Therefore, the question returns: why should we think sipping is problematic?

The proposal is that it is valuable to act in accordance with your own concerns (Hourdequin 2010). You care about the wounded men, and you should bring your conduct in line with this concern (that is, regardless of whether this helps the wounded men in any way). If you would sip from the tank, in contrast, you would violate your integrity, and not act in line with your concern for the wounded men. The reasoning in general steps:

- (1) I believe the collective harm is bad, and want it not to occur.
- (2) I should act in line with my concern. (Integrity premise)
- (3) Hence, I should not participate in the group causing the collective harm.

Hourdequin (2010) and others start from a duty to be politically engaged (or a belief that the government should solve the problem, as in Sinnott-Armstrong 2005), and argue that you should bring your personal conduct in line with this. But, we can also start from a personal concern, and argue that you should bring your conduct in line with this. Integrity has a number of dimensions (Scherkoske 2013), but one that is relevant here is "coherence," that one's actions cohere with one's concerns (regardless, I take it, of whether these are political or personal).

The Superfluity Problem causes trouble for the inference of (3). Even when you care about the wounded men, and you should act in line with this, why should you

refrain from taking a sip if it makes no difference to their situation? Conversely, why would taking a sip count as compromising your integrity?

Again, we *could* solve this problem by assuming that your conduct would be instrumentally significant. If not taking a sip would be helpful and influence the victims' situation positively, then refusing to help out would plausibly be a violation of your integrity. But if your conduct does not influence anything in any relevant way, then how can we explain this incoherence? A non-instrumental answer has yet to be developed in the debate.

Also, using an instrumental assumption risks making the integrity account redundant. For, in that case you already have to act because doing so would be instrumentally significant, i.e., independent of your concerns.<sup>10</sup>

The Disconnect Problem seems to be less pressing for this approach. Imagine you are holding a banner to raise awareness for the men in the desert. Even when you perform such disconnected actions, your integrity would still be damaged if you continued to sip from the tank (assuming this indeed violates your integrity, and thus that there is a solution to the Superfluity Problem). In general, integrity seems to be not only about achieving coherence (between concerns and conduct) in *one* way, but about not being incoherent in *any* way.

Compare the case of eating meat. If you believe that factory farms are bad, then it is quite natural to think that you should boycott their products.<sup>11</sup> However, doing so will not improve the animals' situation in any way. These farms will only close, or reduce production, if *enough* people boycott their products. In light of your concern, you may decide to do various things: "push for regulatory reforms, technological breakthroughs, or new approaches to farming." (Shahar 2022: 142)<sup>12</sup> The question is whether you should also, or at least, abstain from eating meat to protect your integrity.

Next: the Significance Problem. Even if responses to the foregoing problems can be found, and there is a story on why I compromise my integrity if I take a sip, then why would this be problematic? What is valuable about integrity? It can be good – non-instrumentally good – for yourself and/or others. Let us focus on the former first. Integrity allows you to avoid cognitive tensions, and this will be valuable to yourself (Von Allmen 2024: 90). If you would sip from the tank, you likely feel tension. If you decide not to do it, you will avoid that tension. (This is non-instrumentally valuable in the sense that its value does not derive from its impact on the collective harm.)

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<sup>10</sup> Regarding charitable giving, Hormio (2026) suggests that some of your donations need to be instrumentally significant, but denies that this makes the integrity account redundant. Integrity requires not only that your beliefs and actions form a unity, but also that your actions form a coherent narrative. Therefore, even when your donations will not be helpful, you might still have to act (a sufficient number of times) so that your actions form a coherent narrative.

<sup>11</sup> In this case, it is not just that some (unorganized) group causes harm (as in Sips of Water), but that some (unorganized) group buys products from an industry that does.

<sup>12</sup> We also consider these alternative courses of action to be instrumentally insignificant.

Note, you feel tension *exactly because* you believe that you should act in line with your concern. Does this not presuppose rather than explain the value of integrity? The question was why one should act in accordance with one's concern. The proposed answer is that this allows you to avoid tension. But, the tension is there only because you *already* think that it is wrong not to act.

But perhaps there is no problem. The tension may be unfounded, but it is also natural. Imagine you meet someone who has taken a sip and feels bad about it, and you say to that person: "Your tension is irrational. After all, we are still figuring out if you should act on your concern!" But this person replies: "I see why you say it is an open question whether I should act on my concern for the wounded men. But I cannot help it, I just feel bad about it!" Even when such tensions are irrational, avoiding them can still be valuable, i.e., for yourself.

Many philosophers, however, are interested in more than merely self-regarding reasons.<sup>13</sup> It is great for you if you acted in line with your concerns, and do not feel any tension, but what might, for example, victims care? They suffer from the collective harm all the same. We may not want to say that these self-regarding reasons are the *wrong* kind of reasons, though they should not be the *only* reasons.

Your integrity can also be good for *others*. Hourdequin suggests: "Where we see in others a lack of [integrity], we often wonder how to make sense of this apparent mismatch, and we may question the sincerity with which certain commitments are held." (2011: 451) In other words, a mismatch is often read as a lack of concern in the first place. For example, keeping your pint is usually read as not caring about the wounded men, and donating it as a sign that your concern for the wounded men is sincere. Your actions are indirect evidence of your concern.

One way of understanding this is that integrity could be useful in an instrumental way (Hedberg 2018: 70). Namely, if other people do not think you are serious, it will be difficult to convince them that they should donate their pints (and influence the situation in such an indirect way).

In contrast, a possible non-instrumental explanation would be this. Showing to others that you are serious could be valuable to them. They may feel supported when they see that others are also concerned about the issue. To give another example, the Black Lives Matter protests are valuable, at least in part, because they "inspire, affirm, or comfort" others in these protests (Cherry 2021: 170). This would form an others-regarding, rather than merely a self-regarding, reason for action. (As before, this is non-instrumental in the sense that you can show support even if that does not affect the collective harm in any way.)

Again, one may worry, why do others think I am sincere when I practice what I preach? Does that not already assume (rather than show) that there is value in aligning your behaviour with your beliefs? Indeed, people seem to assume this

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<sup>13</sup> On this theme, see Hill (1979). Williams (1973: sections 4-5) was aware of this issue.

when they read my behavior, although the integrity account itself does not make this assumption. It is an open question whether such a non-instrumental justification of integrity can avoid circularity.

In Sips of Water, the integrity account reasons:

- (1) I believe the wounded men should not suffer.
- (2) I should act in line with my concern.
- (3) Hence, I should not sip from the tank.

So far we discussed the inference to (3), and premise (2). But what about (1)? What if you do not care about the wounded men? In that case, you do not seem to be able to compromise your integrity. This forms a problem for the integrity account. You cannot simply escape your duties by not caring about the wounded men. Even if you do not care, the thought is, you *should* care. Or, in other words, caring about others would be an “obligatory end.”

An account that explicitly starts from this obligatory end is Albertzart (2019).<sup>14</sup> Specifically, Albertzart derives a duty for individual climate action from “the imperfect duty to adopt the obligatory end of other people’s happiness.” She argues that this duty is incompatible with a carbon-intensive lifestyle. Caring about others does not come cheap. In steps, her reasoning can be presented as follows:

- (1) I should care about others.
- (2) Hence, I should choose the necessary means to this end.
- (3) Hence, I should combat climate change.
- (4) Hence, I should choose a collective strategy to combat climate change.
- (5) I choose the strategy where everyone refrains from flying.
- (6) Hence, I should refrain from flying.

In (4), it is not required that you select *all* possible strategies to solve the given problem. One option is to choose the strategy in (5), and then you should also refrain from flying yourself. But there are other possible strategies, such as everyone protesting government policies and demanding better ones. Are you free to select *any* possible strategy? For example, if it were allowed to choose the strategy where everyone refrains from unnecessary AI use, then this argument would allow you to fly every weekend. But that is an odd result, given that caring about others should not come cheap. To block such a result, the range of possible strategies to choose from may be restricted (Wieland 2024a).

Ananiev (2026) puts pressure on the inference to (3). He points out that the end in (1) – to care about others – is very general, and admits latitude. You may choose to combat climate change, but you may also select a very different project. For example, you may focus your efforts on the homeless in your neighbourhood. Even granting (3), the inference to (6) is controversial. According to Ananiev, you

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<sup>14</sup> Albertzart does not label her account as an integrity account. I am discussing it here since it tries to bridge the gap between obligatory ends and reasons for action.

may still contribute to a collective harm if you choose some *other* collective strategy to solve the problem.

However, does caring about others not come with certain minimum requirements, and *at least* require that you join the fight against climate change? Climate change is such a fundamental problem which threatens virtually everyone on the planet. For this reason, Smits (2026a) argues, it is problematic to spend more than our fair share of the emissions budget. More generally, caring about others might require, at the very least, that you care about the most salient collective harms that threaten them, and that you do your part to address them (Smits 2026b).

Another question for Albertzart's account is how we should read step (5) "I choose the strategy where everyone refrains from flying." This cannot plausibly be read as an intention (Ananiev 2026). You can intend that *you* refrain from flying, though it is trickier to intend that *other people* do so. You may hope or wish they stop flying, but intending this seems just not something you can do. But if (5) is not an intention that others act in some way, what is it?

Fanciullo (2021) suggests that the relevant attitude we should adopt in Drops of Water is a *conditional* intention: I intend to add my pint if I believe that enough others intend to add theirs. In the case of climate change, this would be the intention to stop flying (or reduce greenhouse gas emissions more broadly) if I believe that enough others intend to do so too.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Pinkert (2015) suggests that we should *be* such that we cooperate in counterfactual contexts where others also cooperate. However we spell out (5), it should roughly be understood as an individual commitment to a collective strategy. You endorse a collective strategy, and are committed to its success.

In certain collective harm cases, there is only one collective strategy possible. Namely that enough people stop contributing (with or without government intervention). Climate harms can only be avoided if everyone on the planet reduces their greenhouse gas emissions (and total emissions reach net zero). In Sips of Water, it is not like I can select some other strategy – for example, ask the government for more water – and then be allowed to continue sipping from the tank. In such a case, we can skip the step "I should choose a collective strategy to avoid the collective harm" and reason as follows:

- (1) I care about the wounded men.
- (2) Hence, I should commit to the collective strategy where people refrain from sipping water from the tank.
- (3) I am not truly committed if I do not act accordingly.
- (4) Hence, I should refrain from sipping water.

This may contain the beginning of a solution to Superfluity Problem (as it affects the integrity account). You do not truly care if you do not commit to a collective strategy that solves the problem, and you do not truly commit to such a strategy if

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<sup>15</sup> Fanciullo does not use this to generate reasons for action, but suggests that people are criticizable if they do not form this conditional intention.

you do not act accordingly. This approach essentially depends on your concern in (1). Since you care, you must commit and act. Nevertheless, both steps – from concern to commitment to a collective strategy, and from the latter to individual action – require proper justification.

For a different illustration, consider the following team sports case:

In a nine-person boat race, your rowing team is slightly behind with 500m to go. You are exhausted and want to ease your effort. However, winning requires at least five rowers to give maximum effort. The decision is whether to endure the pain or to ease up. (Soon 2021: 3362)

This time, there is not a group that causes harm, but a group that can win. The assumption is that putting in maximum effort makes no difference. There is a chance that winning depends on you, but the chance is very small. Either enough other team members put in maximum effort and your team wins, or this is not the case. (If you think this chance is high enough, increase the number of rowers in your boat to, say, 20.)

Why should an individual rower put in maximum effort if this makes no difference? Soon suggests: “Because she has committed, the question ‘why should I [put in maximum effort] when doing so does not make a difference?’ cannot arise for this agent.” (2021: 3364) The idea: she should put in maximum effort, or else she is not committed to winning. The problem is that this looks like a placeholder for some solution to the Superfluity Problem (“why act in light of your commitment if that is instrumentally insignificant?”) rather than a solution itself. A story that generates reasons for action from commitments seems to be possible, but what is it?

## 5. Expression

The next account:

### *Expression*

You should not take a sip, or donate your pint, because by doing so you make a relevant statement.

In principle, these statements can be about quite a few things, and be meant for various audiences. They could be about yourself (self-regarding), about or for others (others-regarding), for victims (victim-regarding), or even for multiple parties at once. Furthermore, these messages could be instrumental, and intended to influence others to take action, and indirectly to affect the collective harm. Two examples:

Collectivization (Lawford-Smith 2015)

“Join us”

Norm setting (Bernstein 2025)

“Donating your pint should be the norm”

Alternatively, messages could be non-instrumental, and not necessarily aim at influencing the collective harm. Here is a list:<sup>16</sup>

Connivance (Lepora and Goodin 2013)

“We should not look away”

Condoning (Lepora and Goodin 2013)

“We should not accept this”

Complicity (Driver 2015)

“I am not willing to cooperate with them”

Sharing your values (Lane 2018)

“This is what I stand for”

Emotions (Fischer 2020)

“I am frustrated about the problem I cannot solve”

Disassociating and showing off (critically discussed in Hill 1979)

“I do not belong to the sippers” “I am better than them”

Disrespect (Talbot 2018, Katz 2023)

“I do not respect the wounded men”

Indifference (Wieland 2022)

“I don’t care” “This is not important to me”

Insult (Christensen 2022)

“I disregard the victim’s interests”

Imagining a project for avoiding the collective harm (Williams 2019)

“Let’s stop sipping?”

Showing support for the project or the people who run it (Hill 1979)<sup>17</sup>

“Great work” “Keep up”

Solidarity with the victims (Fischer 2020)

“I see you” “I stand with you”

Taking a stand (Demirtas 2026)

“I oppose this injustice”

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<sup>16</sup> Some of these messages are displayed if you donate your pint, some if you keep it, and some are avoided if you donate. The authors mentioned discuss these possible messages, though not everyone can be said to endorse the overall approach based on expression.

<sup>17</sup> Hill’s positive proposal: “The point ... is not so much to gain benefits for oneself or to punish the corrupt but to enable one to honor the persons, groups, and causes that, from a moral point of view, most deserve it.” (1979: 99)

Before looking at some specific accounts, let us consider the Superfluity Problem. Why would actions such as donating one's pint express anything, given that it is instrumentally insignificant?

Consider this case: "Lisa is out for dinner. She orders the vegetable lasagna, rather than a meat option, because she feels like it, and not because of anything to do with animal welfare." (Nefsky 2018: 280) Nefsky's question is this: if Lisa's choice is taken to be instrumentally insignificant, and does not advance animal welfare in any way, why would it express any concern for animal welfare? Conversely, if someone's choice for the meat option does not affect animals in any way, why would it express a lack of concern?

Thus, the question is how actions gain meaning. I see at least four options. First, your local context (e.g., your friends) may interpret your actions in a certain way. Second, a broader culture may interpret your actions in a certain way. Third, agents themselves understand their actions in a certain way and/or make this explicit through a public statement. Finally, victims of the collective harm may interpret your actions in a certain way.

Christensen (2022) focuses on the latter, the victims. Christensen addresses pre-emption cases ("if I do not do it, someone else will") rather than collective harm cases, but we will see if his approach can be extended to the latter. His example is arms sales. If you did not sell weapons to an oppressive regime, other parties would. In such a situation, you make no difference to the oppression of the victims. However, sales still seem to be problematic. What could explain this?

Christensen suggests that even when your arms sale makes no difference to the oppression, the victims may still consider it insulting. In steps:

- (1) The victims of oppressive regimes believe that the seller is an unconditional seller.
- (2) If this is so, selling weapons is insulting for the victims.
- (3) Hence, selling weapons is wrong.

This argument refers to the distinction between conditional and unconditional sellers. Conditional sellers act with the intention "I will sell weapons only if there are other sellers and it makes no difference to the oppression." Unconditional sellers, in contrast, act with the intention "I will sell weapons regardless of whether there are other sellers." Victims are offended by the latter because "the message conveyed to them is that the exporter in question attributes insignificant weight to their interests." (Christensen 2022: 18)

Note that Christensen's account is not about the attitudes of the agent (the seller), but about how those attitudes are interpreted by others (the victims). A key characteristic of insults is that they are "additive." The more parties that insult you, the worse it is for you. Anyone who is perceived as offering weapons

unconditionally makes the insult worse. For example, three parties behaving this way is worse than just two parties behaving this way.<sup>18</sup>

Could something similar apply to collective harms? The basic idea would be that you should act not just because you are a bad agent if you are willing to involve yourself, but – shifting our focus to victims – it is insulting to *them*. More precisely, we need to distinguish conditional and unconditional sippers. Conditional sippers act thinking “I will sip only if it does not harm the wounded men,” while unconditional sippers sip regardless of the victims’ interests. If the wounded men believe people are unconditional sippers, they are insulted on top of the extreme thirst they already suffer. Moreover, the more people who sip and are perceived to do so unconditionally, the worse the insult. Everyone has a reason not to sip, then, to avoid these additional insults.

This approach seems promising, though there are some issues. First, in collective harm cases the condition “only if it makes no difference to the wounded men” is vacuously satisfied. In contrast to pre-emption cases, sipping makes no difference whether there are any “backup” sippers or not. What matters, however, is how the victims perceive your intentions, and they may still think you are sipping regardless of their interests. Plausibly, they think you are sipping because you want something to drink and have not considered their interests for a second.

Second, the Significance Problem. Even if each additional sip increases the insult, it is still a question of how bad this is. Besides, does it really matter to the victims whether 999 or 1,000 sippers insult them? Alternatively, let us assume that non-sippers show support for the wounded men. The question is how valuable this is. Victims could think: she *says* she cares, but what she is doing for us – not sipping – is insignificant. And again, does it really matter if 999 or 1,000 non-sippers show their support?

This raises a deeper worry. Is making statements of support the only thing you can do? That seems so helpless. But I think this is only what we should expect, given the assumption that we cannot help the victims in any way. (If we *could* do more, it is hard to deny that we should do more.)

Third, what if the victims think that people only sip conditionally? Sippers could claim: “I would never sip if it made your situation worse.” Of course, this is not necessarily compelling. Victims may still be insulted if they are not convinced that the sippers would act differently in alternative circumstances. To convince the wounded men, self-described conditional sippers could donate money to them to show that they care about them and take their interests into account (cf. Christensen 2022: 20). This would be to reinvent the Disconnect Problem, and allow you to do something instead of stopping sipping.

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<sup>18</sup> Christensen (2026) presents a further objection. By saying, “I will sell weapons, but only if there are backup sellers,” you are saying that you are not to blame, but the backups. By making it more difficult for the victims to identify the wrongdoer and understand what is going on, you are still wronging them on an epistemic level.

Pinkert suggests that the best way to communicate your willingness not to sell weapons is simply not to offer them: “Withdrawing her supply then is not an act intended to make the world better, but it is a communicative act by which the dealer signifies her willingness to exclude the warlord from any kind of weapons supply.” (2015: 998) Similarly, the best way to tell everyone that you are willing to stop sipping is to just stop sipping.

While this approach generates victim-regarding reasons in some contexts, it has its limits. If victims think you act conditionally, or if they do not know you at all, this account will not generate any reasons for action. We could imagine victims saying: “Why should I be offended when I know what you are doing is insignificant?” It is an open issue what victims think, and this requires an empirical analysis of what goes on in their minds. It may also be completely unclear to the wounded who are sipping. What if they do not have time to pay attention to the sippers and their exact intentions? After all, they are suffering from thirst and have other things on their minds.

It is instructive to contrast these ideas with what Demirtas (2026) says. He uses the following case: “Jane is in a courtroom witnessing a grave injustice against the defendant due to racial prejudices. She knows her community. She knows that unfortunately nothing she might do will change anyone’s mind in the courtroom.” (2026: 708) According to Demirtas, Jane has a reason to take a stand against the injustice, and more generally that people have reasons to take a stand even if it makes no difference.

This proposal is *not* intended to be victim-regarding. Taking a stand is considered valuable even when the victim will never hear about it. The defendant may not be in the room, or ever hear about Jane’s statement. Also, the proposal is not attitude-based. Even if Jane does not care about the injustice, she still has reason to take a stand.

Again, the question is whether this approach also works for collective harm cases. The idea would be that you have reason to take a stand against the men’s suffering even if it makes no difference to their situation.

Let us first consider the Significance Problem. Is taking a stand valuable enough? Demirtas mentions a potential virtue ethical story: “Taking a stand for a good outcome (/against a bad outcome) is morally valuable because it is an embodiment of loving the good (/hating the bad).” (2026: 715) It is valuable to relate to good and bad outcomes in the right way.

We could agree that it seems intuitively valuable to Jane to take a stand. But it is important that we bracket many possible explanations. Jane will not influence others, nor will she strengthen her own disposition to speak out in future cases. Also, her support will not reach the victim or anyone else. Suppose, plausibly, that some people in her community actually do care about the injustice. They may feel supported if Jane speaks out. But if we bracket all that, what is left?

This approach also faces the Disconnect Problem. Even if you have a reason to make a statement about the men’s suffering, it is another question why you

should donate your pint. Demirtas (2026: 713) suggests that, in many cases, the agents themselves would know what to do, even when the account does not specify this. Still, there will be situations where you can take a stand in various ways, and you do not know what to do. You may think: “Should I take a stand by donating my pint if this is insignificant?”

If your statement is meant (at least in part) for victims, the Disconnect Problem is that you can also show support in various disconnected ways. For example, you could organize a demonstration for the wounded men, and distribute large banners. Is there any argument that donating your pint is *especially* valuable?

One idea is that acting in disconnected ways may be interpreted as too cheap. Take Lawford-Smith’s example:

“Imagine encountering an individual wearing a T-shirt printed with the slogan “I am Reducing My Greenhouse Gas Emissions!” ... Momentarily, you are impressed that she has bought the T-shirt, and is wearing it about, ostensibly as a signal to others of her environmental commitments. Then you discover, around the next corner, a group of environmental activists handing the T-shirts out for free. This makes you wonder: is she really reducing her GHG emissions? ... Or did she just like the idea of a free T-shirt?” (2015: 324)

Lawford-Smith’s instrumental lesson: if other people do not take your statement to be sincere, it will not motivate them to take action. But we could also read the case in a non-instrumental way. Namely, cheap signals are perceived as insincere, and will therefore be less supportive for victims. Hormio writes: “Singing the praises of contributing, or wearing a T-shirt promoting such contributions, can express genuine support and solidarity, ... but only in a narrative chain where it makes sense to give them such a reading.” (2025: 129) The idea, then, is that “connected” actions (e.g., donating one’s pint) form an essential part of that support. If they are essential, there *may* be a solution to the Disconnect Problem.

## 6. Fairness

The final account that I will discuss:

### *Fairness*

You should not take a sip, or donate your pint, because it is your fair share of a collective task, and others are doing their share as well.

This account has several components: a group of agents has the task of avoiding the given collective harm, you are assigned to do a share of this task, and other people are also assigned a share, that they perform. In Drops of Water, the pint bearers have a collective task to save the wounded men, each pint bearer has a share of this collective task, and other pint bearers are doing their part.

Cullity (2000, 2023) endorses this view, and explicitly bases his solution on collective duties.<sup>19</sup> Here is his description of people who fail to do their share: “he relies on others to do what we ought collectively to be doing, without contributing himself... he is leaving the work of meeting it to others” (2000: 15)<sup>20</sup>

I label this approach “others-regarding.” If others are trying to avoid some collective harm, then you should also act, i.e., to avoid unfairness towards them. For example, if others stop sipping from the tank, then you should stop too. You should do this to avoid unfairness towards *those who stopped sipping*. In this way, you are not acting for yourself (e.g., to avoid blame) or for victims (e.g., to avoid offending them), but for others around you.

However, if it is required that other people have already stopped sipping, or started donating their pint, then we run into a problem regarding first movers. Cullity says: “If no one is trying to satisfy the collective obligation, I am not being unfair by refraining from acting myself.” (2000: 18) But, if you do not have to act if others do not act first, then it might happen that no one starts. And if no one starts, the wounded men will not be saved.

Therefore, there should be reason to act as first mover, and we may want to weaken the requirement that others already act (Hindriks 2023). Perhaps it is not necessary that enough people already donate, or that enough people are willing to donate if others are, or that even one person donates. But at least *some* people should be willing to donate if others are. It should be a relevant possibility that people start donating, and that the wounded men can be saved.

This approach is well-suited to addressing Nefsky’s challenges. The Superfluity Problem: if my conduct is considered insignificant and not helpful, why would it count as “doing my share”? Here is a potential answer: your share is determined on the basis of some fair procedure. There could be various ways to divide the tasks. We could say that everyone should stop sipping entirely, or that everyone gets an equal share of the tank (no more than one sip, so that we leave enough for the wounded men), or that some select people may sip, but most may not (e.g., let us give it to the people who need it the most or deserve it the most). Anything based on some fair procedure can be inserted.<sup>21</sup> We could even use a first come, first served system, or have a lottery.

However your share is determined, you should do your share, then, to be fair, not to be helpful. Why assign people a task that is instrumentally useless and not helpful? Answer: *together* these tasks do make a difference and are helpful. Note that non-instrumental solutions can still accept that contributions together are instrumentally significant. After all, that is part of the problem definition (Wieland et al. 2026).

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<sup>19</sup> Fairness ideas have been employed in various contexts, including voting (Brennan 2009), climate change (Batz 2014), and vaccination (Giubilini 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Sometimes you are unfair when you benefit from the work of others without returning the favour. That does not apply to cases where you are not a victim, such as Drops of Water.

<sup>21</sup> Compare the debate on dividing the remaining emissions budget (Schulan et al. 2023).

The Disconnect Problem is the question of whether it is possible to be fair in disconnected ways. For example, if we were only interested in equality of resources, we might as well throw our pint on the ground instead of in the cart (Nefsky 2015: 259). The response cannot be that throwing it on the ground is not helpful. For donating it to the cart is also assumed to be instrumentally insignificant. A better response is that throwing your pint on the ground does not count as doing your share to help the wounded men. It is simply not the task you have been assigned to do (on any plausible procedure). Your task is to donate your pint.

Next: the Significance Problem. What is so valuable about doing your share if it makes no difference? Answer: because it is unfair to leave the work to others, and burden them with a problem that is also your problem. Enough people should do their share, which is individually insignificant, but collectively significant. It is not that the group cannot do it without you – no one, on its own, is needed – but it cannot be done without *enough* of us. What you are doing is valuable, not because your task is necessary, but because it is your fair share of our collective task.

Is there any further argument for why unfairness would be particularly bad in this context? Baatz suggests: “Taking more than one’s fair share is immoral because one ... deprives others of their fair share.” (2014: 3) In Sips of Water, the more water you take from the tank, the less others can still take. In Drops of Water, the less you add to the cart, the more others should add. Fairness would be valuable, then, because this allows you to avoid negatively affecting other people – not the victims this time, but your fellow contributors.

Yet, *can* you negatively affect fellow contributors if what you are doing is instrumentally insignificant? Gunnemyr writes: “It is not as if the other pint holders in Drops of Water have to donate more if I do not donate my pint. By hypothesis, no one will suffer more if I do not donate my pint.” (2021: 33) Why should other people not have to work harder, or do more, to avoid the collective harm? The idea is that your share of the work makes no difference in accomplishing the collective task, and therefore other people do not have to take it over *to get a better outcome*.

Even so, if there is a collective task, and you have been given a share of that task, which you are not doing, it is still true that your share of the work is not done. Is this important? As I see it, this approach is not incompatible with “slack-taking” – that others must take over the work – but it also does not entail it. After all, the usual victim-regarding arguments for slack-taking (Miller 2011, Karnein 2014) do not apply straightforwardly. If taking up someone’s slack will not improve the victims’ situation in any way, then you do not have to do it *with regards to them*.

However, if a group of people slack, then you might have victim-regarding reasons to take up the slack *of the whole group*, even when it is unfair that you must do this. Suppose no one donates their pint. In that case, you might have victim-regarding reasons to donate a full water cart. For sure, this would only apply in cases where you *can* take up other people’s slack. In many collective harm cases,

you cannot do this. In Sips of Water, other people have to stop sipping themselves. You cannot do that for them, nor can you make them do this.

As we have seen, the fairness approach has an answer to Nefsky's challenges.<sup>22</sup> Still, it rests on strong assumptions. It assumes that unorganized groups (such as the group of pint holders) have collective tasks, as well as some procedure that distributes the work fairly among the group members. Are these assumptions really needed? Wieland (2024a, 2026) develops a fairness approach that is designed to avoid these strong assumptions. Regardless of whether there is any collective duty to avoid the collective harm, the proposal is that you *want* others to do the work. And if you want others to do their part, you should do yours too, to avoid making an unfair exception for yourself.

## 7. Open cases

Distinguish:

### *Open Drops*

An unknown number of people are donating their pints. It is up in the air whether the wounded men will make it.

### *Closed Drops*

Too many people keep their pints. It is certain that the wounded men will not make it.

In Open Drops, it is up in the air if the collective harm can be avoided. It is possible that it occurs (if too many people contribute), and it is possible that it does not occur (if enough people stop contributing). Closed cases, in contrast, are situations where you know that the collective harm can no longer be avoided (but you may still have reason to act, e.g., to show support for its victims).<sup>23</sup>

Non-instrumental accounts are not specifically concerned with open cases, and may also apply in (certain) closed cases. The focus of participation theorists lies on – possibly closed – cases where groups cause harm, and you would have reason not to participate in these groups. Integrity theorists focus on the agent and her integrity. What others are doing, and so the distinction between open and closed cases, is not so relevant for this approach. The focus of expression theorists lies on – again, possibly closed – cases where most people do not act and you would have strong reasons to make a statement. The focus of fairness theorists lies on cases where most people do their fair share, and you have reasons not to be unfair to them, and these cases could also be closed.

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<sup>22</sup> Andreou (2026) argues that in certain cases where agents are not self-interested, fairness-based reasons do not apply. In such cases, we cannot say that agents should act to be fair to others, but rather to play their part in a coordinated plan.

<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, they are situations where you know that the collective harm will *not* occur, but you may still have reason to act, e.g., out of fairness. See below.

Nefsky claims: “There should be additional, or substantially stronger, reasons for action in [Open Drops] than in [Closed Drops].” (2023: 55) First reading: reasons are different in nature in open cases. Second reading: reasons are different in strength of degree. Nefsky wants to say both. In open cases, there are different sorts of reasons for action, namely instrumental reasons. And even if you do not accept that, Nefsky wants to say that, whatever reasons there are, reasons for action in open cases are stronger (all else equal). Intuitively, I think many will agree with the latter. If collective harms can still be avoided, we seem to have stronger reason to do something. Nefsky’s final challenge: how can non-instrumental approaches explain that reasons for action are stronger in open cases?

I see at least three possible responses. First, they could add an open case clause to the non-instrumental accounts.<sup>24</sup> If they were to add that reasons for action are stronger when this condition obtains, they could maintain that in Open Drops reasons to donate are stronger than in Closed Drops. But such a response would be ad hoc, and not really offer any explanation of *how* such reasons would be stronger.

Second, they could add instrumental reasons to their non-instrumental reasons, and maintain that *overall* reasons for action are strong because both kinds of considerations apply. You should donate your pint, then, both to influence the victims’ situation and to make a statement (for example).

This latter response is promising, but I believe an even stronger response is available. In large collective action cases involving many contributors, you may be instrumentally insignificant, and there may be *no* instrumental reasons to act in one way or another. Even when instrumental reasons for action may *appear* stronger in open cases, then, they may not in fact be stronger. *They could be absent*. If they are absent (or very weak), that might debunk the intuition that we have stronger reasons to act in Open Drops.

Nefsky writes: “It is doubtful that we can capture why there is additional, or stronger, reason for the individual to act in the open cases while embracing that there is no difference in instrumental significance between your contribution in the open cases and your contribution in the closed cases.” (2023: 55) It is important, however, to distinguish between two senses of “instrumental insignificance.” First, your influence on the victims’ situation may be negligible, and in that case you are instrumentally insignificant regardless of whether the case is closed. On top of that, the case could be closed. The thought cannot be that, just because the case is open, your influence is significant.

In this chapter we are keeping the first factor fixed: your contribution and influence on the collective harm is taken to be negligible. The only factor we are varying here is whether the case is open or closed. Despite intuitions to the contrary, reasons for action may not be stronger in open cases – that is, unless there is some further (instrumental or non-instrumental) explanation for this.

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<sup>24</sup> On one reading, Nefsky’s helping account can be read as participation in open cases (Van Oeveren and Wieland 2024).

Let us consider the following, related objection to non-instrumental accounts: “The Anti-Performative Principle: our non-instrumental reasons (if they exist at all) to engage in merely performative acts [i.e., causally irrelevant gestures and poses] are much weaker than our reasons to perform acts that can play a significant causal role.” (Nye et al. 2024) To illustrate:

“Superior is elected on a platform that includes important environmental promises. But Superior is not fulfilling these promises due to corporate opposition within Superior’s coalition. One can spend most of one’s free time (O1) complaining about the situation and criticizing random supporters of Superior on social media, or (O2) participating in campaigns to lobby or pressure Superior or other federal, state, or local decision makers to take needed environmental action.” (Nye et al. 2024)

Note first that non-instrumental reasons for posting things on social media will also be very weak, or completely absent. For example, by posting something you are not doing your fair part in the fight against climate change, and it will not yield much support for climate victims.

At any rate, the question is whether our everyday dilemmas have this structure. Most people cannot engage in effective political action. What individuals *can* do is perform actions – voting, not flying, not eating meat, influencing one or two others, joining a demonstration, donating money, and so on – which are individually insignificant, but collectively significant.

Let me end by raising an opposite objection to instrumental approaches. Kagan (2011) and Nefsky (2017) are paradigm proponents. They basically say: “Act only in open cases.” Here is why: only in open cases you can possibly make a difference, or help out. If the case is closed, and there is no way to influence the outcome any longer – e.g., if you know that your purchase of chicken will not help incentivize more production – then you may just buy chicken.<sup>25</sup> Kagan responds:

“Some may find this implication disappointing. They want to condemn buying a chicken even when one knows that doing this does not in any way increase the suffering of chickens.” (2011: 128)

Closed cases where you know that other people restrain themselves seem to pose special problems for instrumental approaches. Imagine the following variant of Sips of Water:

By social decree, sipping is no longer tolerated. You know that all others will adhere to this ban. Everyone is privately tempted to sip, but they choose to refrain out of a belief in shared responsibility for avoiding harm to the wounded men.

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<sup>25</sup> Nefsky (2023: 55) allows that there may be *other* reasons in closed cases, though her helping-based reasons only apply in open cases (Nefsky 2017).

What could instrumental approaches say about such cases? The issue is not that they do not explain reasons for action in closed cases. We may debate whether there should be reasons in closed cases, and especially whether there should be *certain types of* reasons in closed cases. We may accept that there are no *instrumental* reasons in closed cases. Instead, the objection is this: both open and closed cases involve an inefficacy problem, and it is puzzling that Kagan and Nefsky leave the same problem – albeit in closed cases – untouched.

How can it be that (certain) non-instrumental approaches account for inefficacy in both sorts of cases? For example, how can it be that the fairness approach explains that you have to do your share both when you know others are doing theirs (and it is certain the collective harm will be avoided), and when it is up in the air if the collective harm will be avoided? This suggests that there is *one* underlying inefficacy problem: “why act if doing so seems insignificant, regardless of whether the case is open or closed”? Whatever the answer may be, it cannot require cases to be open. Approaches that *only* address inefficacy in open cases, then, may not be addressing the full problem.<sup>26</sup>

## 8. Open issues

In conclusion, let us recapitulate some key issues that deserve attention in future work.

The participation account struggles with the Significance Problem. There may be certain self-regarding reasons for not participating in groups that cause harm, but the question is how weighty they are.

The integrity account aims to generate reasons for action from the agent’s concerns and commitments. It is the only account that has not yet found an answer to the Superfluity Problem. Solving this problem is a top priority.

Expressive accounts claim that certain actions can be offensive or supportive. More work needs to be done on how this works, and whether there is a solution to the Disconnect Problem.

The fairness account had answers to all of Nefsky’s challenges, although it starts from strong assumptions, and the question is whether they can be avoided.

Presumably, considerations of participation, integrity, expression, and fairness do not exhaust the non-instrumental landscape. Are there further non-instrumental considerations that may be employed in this context?<sup>27</sup>

All these accounts had something to say about why it is valuable to do something that is instrumentally insignificant. Still, more work needs to be done on the strength of reasons. One factor that seems to correlate with the strength of

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<sup>26</sup> In Wieland et al. (2026) we distinguish different problems, and what we call “the basic problem” does not require cases to be open.

<sup>27</sup> For example, using work on rule consequentialism, Kantian ethics, or contractualism.

reasons is what other people are doing. If many others are taking action (e.g., donating their pint), then there will be strong others-regarding reasons to join them.<sup>28</sup> If in contrast many others are contributing to the collective harm (e.g., sipping from the tank), and the probability of the latter is high, then there will be strong victim-regarding reasons to make a statement. Yet, *how* are these reasons for action stronger or weaker? What factors can explain this? And when exactly do they outweigh reasons to do something else with your money and time?

Finally, we discussed the distinction between open and closed cases. Intuitively, reasons for action seem to be stronger in open cases. What could non-instrumental accounts say about open cases?

Currently, instrumental work has received more attention in the debate. Hopefully, this overview shows that there is interesting work to be done on the other side.

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<sup>28</sup> At least if other people also prefer to avoid effort (Trifan 2020, Wieland 2024b).

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