

Wasted Effort and Universalization

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Abstract

Why should individuals stop contributing to collective harms if this is a waste of effort? For example, why should people change their lifestyles in the face of climate change? This chapter develops a solution in terms of desire-based universalization: we should act because we want others to act, and we should not make an unfair exception for ourselves. The chapter goes into the content of these desires, discusses the case where people do not seem to have the relevant desires, and whether the reasons based on them are strong enough.

In *The Ethics of Inefficacy*
(Routledge 2026)

1. The problem

Consider:

Robinson has a nice life on his small island. However, the water surrounding the island has begun to rise. Millions of people living along the shore dump their garbage into the lake, causing the levels to rise. You are one of them. If people do not change their ways, the rising tide will swallow the island and Robinson will eventually drown.

Robinson's case is a metaphor for many of today's problems.¹ Millions of people fly, resulting in too much CO₂ in the atmosphere, extreme weather, and climate victims. However, no fewer planes are flying if you do not book. Millions of consumers buy meat or products for which people are exploited, which sustains those industries. But there will be no less production or better treatment of workers if you leave the given products on the shelves.

In these collective actions, what we do individually is insignificant. And yet we seem to have reason to act in one way rather than another. After all, what we do *together* is significant. If *no one* books flights, planes will have to stay on the ground. If *no one* eats meat, factory farms will have to close.

The problem – the inefficacy problem – goes deeper, however. I do not want Robinson to drown. As far as I am concerned, it is much worse for him to drown than for me to make the effort to dispose of my garbage properly and pay a small amount of money (say 1 euro per bag). Yet I cannot ensure Robinson's survival simply by making this effort. After all, whether Robinson survives depends on whether *enough* people are willing to pay for garbage disposal, not whether *I* am.

Besides, I do not want to pay unnecessary costs. If too many others dump their garbage in the lake, Robinson will drown anyway, and I would only be wasting money by taking it elsewhere. If enough others stop dumping, Robinson will survive anyway, and again, I would only be wasting money if I had processed my garbage properly. Whatever others do, it is always better for me to throw my garbage into the lake (see Table 1).

| | <i>Too many others dump their garbage</i> | <i>Enough others pay to process their garbage</i> |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>I dump my garbage in the lake</i> | Robinson drowns | Robinson survives |
| <i>I pay to process my garbage</i> | Robinson drowns + cost to me | Robinson survives + cost to me |

Table 1: Decision matrix in Robinson's case

¹ The case is adapted from Barry and Øverland (2016: 225). I have made the group of garbage dumpers much larger. Real islands currently facing Robinson's fate include the Maldives, Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands.

The problem is that the same reasoning applies to everyone else. And if everyone acts accordingly, we will throw too much garbage into the lake and Robinson will die. The question is this: *why should I pay to have my garbage processed if it is a waste of effort?*

In this chapter, I treat the issue as an “open case.” Robinson is not yet drowned, and it is not yet a lost cause. He can still be saved if enough people stop dumping. The question is why any individual should stop if this is wasted effort. Is there a compelling argument?²

There are two very different approaches to this question: instrumental and non-instrumental (Nefsky 2023: 40).³ What is valuable about your individual action? The instrumental answer: because it influences the outcome. In contrast, non-instrumental approaches start from the assumption that we cannot influence many collective harms in any relevant way – they are just too big – and try to find alternative reasons for action.

In this chapter, I will discuss a non-instrumental reason based on a certain form of “universalization.” The core proposal: you should act and waste effort because you want others to act too, and you should not make an unfair exception for yourself. I explain the account (section 3), go into the content of these desires (section 4), address Nefsky’s challenges (section 5), discuss the case where people do not seem to have the relevant desires (section 6), address two objections (sections 7 and 8), and discuss the strength of these reasons (section 9).

2. Instrumental analyses

By way of contrast, let us first see what two main instrumental approaches would say about Robinson’s case: Kagan’s expected consequences view (2011) and Nefsky’s helping view (2017).

Does dumping garbage *really* make no difference? You definitely make a difference to the amount of garbage in the lake. Could we not say that if you did not dump your garbage, the water level would be a millimeter lower? The lake is huge. Water levels are rising only because millions of people are dumping their garbage. And even if it does rise a millimeter, Robinson will only drown if the water rises too high and floods his island. Until then, he can just enjoy his life.

The same goes for the real-life cases mentioned. Corporations are not going to produce less, fly less, emit less CO₂, and harm victims less unless there is a large enough group of people who do not buy their products or services. In these so-

² If the case is closed and Robinson cannot be saved anymore, the problem changes (Nefsky 2023: 56).

³ An entirely different approach is to involve the government, which could punish garbage dumpers. We assume that no such solution exists or is effective.

called “threshold cases” no relevant difference is made until a certain threshold is met (Kagan 2011: 118).⁴

Yet, there is still a *chance* that you will make a relevant difference. At some point, there is too much garbage in the lake. Let us set this limit to n . If n bags of garbage are dumped – say, 31,654,883 bags – then Robinson drowns. If $n-1$ bags are dumped (31,654,882), then Robinson survives (just barely). It seems that you should not be number n to dump a bag. You should not be the one who causes Robinson to drown. However, many others could dump their garbage after you, and then your bag would still make no difference.

There is only one scenario where you do make a relevant difference. Namely, when there are exactly n dumpers, including yourself (Kagan 2011: 125-7). In this scenario, it is true for every agent that the results would have been better if she had acted differently. If only 31,654,882 bags were dumped, Robinson would survive. It does not matter if you were the first or the last in that group.

But what should you do if it is unclear whether there will be exactly n dumpers? You cannot see Robinson’s island in the distance, and you cannot see how much garbage has been thrown into the lake. In that case, we can still work with the *chance* that there will be exactly n dumpers. Even if this chance is small, it may be too risky to take.

Assume that Robinson’s life is worth at least 10,000 times more than the cost of disposal (just for illustration), and that the chance that there will be exactly n dumpers is $1/1,000$. Then the expected value of paying (my cost: -1) is higher than the expected value of dumping (-10). In such a case, I should not dump my garbage.

The problem, however, is that this chance could be much smaller than $1/1,000$. Millions of people dump their garbage into the lake. What are the odds that there will be exactly n dumpers? In real-life collective actions, such chances are also often very small. For example, the likelihood of less production and fewer animals being slaughtered in factory farms because you leave meat products on the shelves is negligible. If you do not buy something, someone else might, or the supermarket throws it away. Even if the supermarket decides to order less in the future, producers can usually find another buyer.⁵

If you cannot make a direct difference to Robinson’s life, you may still be able to make an *indirect* difference (Lawford-Smith 2015). By paying for garbage disposal, you can set an example and inspire others to do the same. If everyone encouraged their neighbors to stop dumping garbage, the problem would be solved as well.

⁴ I will focus on Robinson’s death as the only relevant outcome, omitting other outcomes such as lake pollution and its subsequent impact on the ecosystem and community.

⁵ See Pinkert (2015), Nefsky (2018), and Budolfson (2019, 2026). The exact chances may differ from case to case, and should be established empirically. Budolfson (2026) argues that reasons for action cannot depend entirely on such empirical information.

It is doubtful, however, that we have this influence on others in the real world (Nefsky 2018: 270-1). My neighbors might notice if I have garbage picked up. But we are unlikely to inspire enough others, that is, to the extent that Robinson benefits in any way. And if it makes no difference to Robinson, and is otherwise wasted effort, why do it? That is the problem we are still looking for an answer to.

Nefsky (2017) argued that even when the expected value of not dumping your garbage is too low, you can still take a step in the right direction and make a helpful contribution to a solution. How should we understand this contribution if it is not about making a difference? As Nefsky suggested, you are instrumentally valuable if you perform an action X for which it is true that “it is possible that [the good outcome] will fail to come about due, at least in part, to a lack of Xing” (2017: 2753). In our case, paying for garbage disposal is helpful, then, because it is possible that Robinson will not be saved if too few people stop dumping.

Are these instrumental reasons strong enough? Robinson can be saved if enough people take a step in the right direction. Together, people can be instrumentally valuable. But what they do individually – we all agree – makes no difference to Robinson. The problem is not that you cannot take a step in the right direction. You can do that, but it is a wasted effort. The question is whether it is important enough to take such a step anyway. Generally, the issue is whether the given account offers *strong enough reasons to waste effort*. Let us call this the “Significance Problem.”

There is a chance that Robinson’s fate depends on you, but Nefsky (2017: 2756) admits that this chance may be too small. If we bracket the scenario where Robinson’s fate depends on you, we are left with two broad scenarios. Either enough people will stop dumping, or too many people will continue (and it is open which scenario will happen). In either case, you would be wasting money by paying for garbage disposal. You *can* take a step in the right direction, but is this important enough if it makes no difference to Robinson’s fate? For example, does it outweigh reasons to spend the money on coffee instead?

I am not saying that this question cannot be answered. In fact, Gunnemyr (2026) offers a recent response. I will explain this in section 9, and compare it to the alternative approach that I will develop next.

3. Desire-Based Universalization

The account is this:

Desire-Based Universalization

If I want others to act in a certain way, then I have reason to act in that way.

This account is a version of the time-honored Golden Rule (“treat others as you want to be treated”). A classic example is this: if I want others to help me when I am in need, then I should help others when they are in need. The underlying idea has to do with fairness and not making an unfair exception for yourself. If you

want others to help *you* when you are in need, but you do not help *them*, then you are making an unfair exception for yourself.

This underlying story has intuitive appeal, and is therefore worth considering. Applied to Robinson's case, you should stop dumping your garbage because you want others to stop, and you should not make an unfair exception for yourself. You want others to take action, and you have no reason to think that you are special, or more important than others, and get a free pass.⁶

You should not make an unfair exception for yourself, even when this is a waste of effort and does not influence Robinson's situation in any relevant way. This is why the reason for action qualifies as non-instrumental.

Before looking at Robinson's case in more detail, a few qualifications are in order. Most importantly, making an unfair exception for yourself is considered a weighty factor that should feature in one's deliberations.⁷ In Kant's case, it is wrong to make a false promise, even when you know that the other person will forget about it, and there will be no bad consequences.

Often I want people to act in a certain way because I care about something else. For example, I want everyone on the planet to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions *because* I care about climate change. In Robinson's case, I want Robinson to survive, so I want people to stop dumping. In general, if I want some collective harm to be avoided, I want people to stop contributing.

This account is desire-based and subjective. You are unfair because *you want* others to act in a certain way, but you refuse to do it yourself. Overall, human beings share basic desires (for love, food, shelter, etc.), but they may differ in certain ways from person to person. I may want help with my chapter, but someone else may not. According to Desire-Based Universalization, then, the latter person does not need to help others with their chapter.⁸

You are acting wrongly on this approach – unfairly – if you allow yourself to do something that you do not want others to do. Whether you are unfair, then, depends on what you want. I take this to be an attractive feature of the view. Why are you being unfair? Because *you* want others to act in a certain way, but not yourself. You do not want other people to take a bigger piece of the pie, so do not do it yourself. You do not want other people jumping the queues you are in, so do not do it yourself.

⁶ I have explored this idea in earlier work (Wieland 2024a) and will elaborate on it here.

⁷ Herman (1993: ch. 7) suggests that the outcome of the universalization test (in particular Kant's) should not be taken as a strict final moral verdict, but rather as input for ongoing deliberation. If we are deliberating about what to do, and a particular option is not universalizable, then we have a "deliberative presumption" against doing it.

⁸ This person may still want help with something else. If so, Desire-Based Universalization still gives her reason to help others. Also, as it stands Desire-Based Universalization only specifies a sufficient condition for reasons for action. In principle, the account would be compatible with *further* grounds for reasons for action.

If you really do not want others to act in a certain way, nothing will follow. The person who truly does not care if others refuse to help her with her chapter, or if others eat the whole pie, is not being unfair in the same way.

Since this account is conditional on people's desires, it cannot really be said to be Kantian. Kant's categorical imperative does not depend on whether you want to be helped when you are in need. Kant thought that you *should* care about other people and help them regardless of your desires (Smits 2026).⁹

Nevertheless, this account is close to Kantian approaches and can make sense of cases discussed by Kantians. Take for example the following case from Korsgaard (1985: 41). You want a competitive job, and to get it, you devise a plan to eliminate your rivals. Why should not you follow through with this plan? This is because you do not want your rivals to kill you, and you should not make an unfair exception for yourself. Why would you want your rivals to eliminate you? If you want the job, Korsgaard notes, you also want to stay alive.

But what if you are so desperate or hateful that you do not care if you stay alive? In such a case, you do not seem to do anything you would not want others to do. You then do not make an exception for yourself, and act wrongly according to this approach (Korsgaard 1985: 43). Still, Korsgaard adds, people are much more likely to want to make an exception for themselves.

Like any approach, Desire-Based Universalization faces potential counterexamples. An example is the following: I do not want others to enter the building when I enter – that would not fit – but that does not make it impermissible for me to enter. There is interesting work on such problem cases, but I will set them aside here.¹⁰ As I see it, Desire-Based Universalization has sufficient intuitive appeal to explore it further in the context of the inefficacy problem.

4. Desires

Let us zoom in on my exact desire in Robinson's case. I do not want Robinson to drown. My core concern is that the collective harm will be avoided. Note that in Korsgaard's case you want others to act for your *own* sake, while in Robinson's case you want others to act for *Robinson's* sake.

But what if I do not care about Robinson? Then I may not want others to stop dumping, and then I do not need to stop dumping myself. In such a case, I am not allowing myself to do something, it seems, that I do not want others to do. I will address this type of case in section 6.

For the moment, we start from the desire that Robinson survives. If I want this, then I want people not to dump their garbage. Because if people stop doing it, he

⁹ Kant did not endorse the Golden Rule. For a defense of the rule against Kant's objections, see Parfit (2011: ch. 46).

¹⁰ See Wieland (2024b). I suggest that wanting others to act differently is fine as long as you make your conduct conditional on other people's preferences.

will survive. In some cases, I literally want *everyone* to take action. For example, in the fight against climate change, I want everyone on the planet to reduce their CO₂ emissions.

In many cases, however, only enough people need to take action. For example, planes are canceled if *enough* people decide not to book. Or, if *enough* people stop buying animal products, supermarkets will order less in the future, and fewer animals will need to be slaughtered. Even in those cases I might have the desire that everyone stops. If I have that desire, I should stop as well.

I might also want that *enough* people stop. If this is the case, how does it follow that I must also stop? That is, why would I be part of the group that I want to stop if my conduct is instrumentally insignificant?

Even if I only want enough people to stop, it will be difficult to say who should be included. Practically speaking, then, I may simply take the group to include everyone. And that would include myself too.

In Robinson's case, everyone stopping will solve the problem. But it may not be what I want. For I might also want people not to waste money. Imagine that you could also donate the money (1 euro per bag) to a local daycare center (Andreou 2026). Again, it is better for everyone individually to give the money to the daycare. It makes no difference to Robinson what each does, and such a small donation allows a child to make an additional drawing. In such a case, I want enough people to stop dumping and the rest to donate the money to the daycare.

One way to think about this is in terms of "default membership." The default is not that everyone needs to stop (since some should not stop, but give their money to the daycare), but at least that *I* am part of the group that needs to stop *unless I have a good reason for why I would not be part of that group*.

People may have valid reasons for being exempt. You may not have money for a garbage disposal. Importantly, however, exceptions should be universalizable. For any exception, you should allow others to use it as well. Imagine you want to throw your garbage in the lake because it is your birthday. If you do not want others to do this on *their* birthday, you are still making an unfair exception for yourself.

On this approach, I need to stop not because the group cannot fix the problem without me – my contribution is still insignificant – but because I am a default member of the group that needs to stop. This approach is especially plausible in cases where almost everyone in the given population is needed to fix the problem. If, say, 90% should stop dumping garbage (to save Robinson), I am a default member of the group unless I have a reason to be exempt.

What if only a smaller percentage of the population is needed? If only 50% should stop dumping, it seems to make less sense to make me a default member of the group that needs to stop. And yet, the idea is, if I do not have a good reason why I would *not* be part of the group that has to stop, I am part of that group.

Compare Kant's central example of the duty to keep a promise. Assume that at least 50% of the promises should be genuine for the practice to remain in existence. I want to borrow money on the basis of a promise, so I want the practice to exist. Therefore, I want at least 50% to keep their promises. I cannot say: I want *other* people to make genuine promises, so that I can make a false promise. This suggests that, here too, I am a default member of the group (that needs to keep its promises).¹¹

Typically, however, our desires are not so fine-grained. Most of the time we do not want a certain percentage of the population to act in a certain way, but just want "others" to do something, without further specification. And if we want "others" to act in a certain way, we should act in that way too (to avoid making an exception for ourselves).

I could also have further desires, and will mention some examples. First, I may want everyone to be a conditional cooperator, i.e., ready to act as soon as the group of people to save Robinson is large enough. Yet this is not enough in the cases we are looking at. Imagine that people are willing to stop dumping once the group of conditional cooperators is large enough. By the time they reach that point, it may be too late. Their bags have already been thrown, and it may no longer be possible to save Robinson.¹²

Second, I may want everyone to coordinate who will stop dumping. Not everyone has to stop, but at least everyone has a responsibility to figure out who has to stop. For example, we could have a lottery to see who has to stop dumping, or use some other fair procedure. In that case, I want the fairly selected people to take action. I need to stop, then, if I am selected. In any case, I want people to coordinate in a certain way, so that the problem can be solved.¹³

Third, sometimes a collective strategy may already be in place (Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell 2026). Suppose a fund has been set up for Robinson, and many people begin to donate. In such cases, I want people to join these strategies.

Fourth, I may want everyone to take action *until the problem is solved*. In this case, everyone does have a reason to stop, but these reasons will disappear (for the rest) once enough people stop dumping, and Robinson's life is no longer at risk. In cases where the problem is urgent and the required coordination is not likely to be expected, I may want this. Climate change is a case in point. I want everyone to

¹¹ If, say, only 1% of the population is needed to solve a given problem, and I have a sophisticated desire that as many people as possible donate to the daycare (Venkatesh 2026), then I am not sure this approach will be helpful.

¹² The same goes for climate change (Hindriks 2023). A solution with conditional cooperators works better in cases with repeated thresholds, such as consumer cases (Shahar 2022: 140). At any point in time, a large enough group of boycotters can reduce the demand for more production.

¹³ Strictly speaking not everyone will be needed to coordinate. Enough people should coordinate who should take action. So I may desire that *enough* people coordinate. But who should coordinate? It then needs to be coordinated who coordinates, and so in into a regress. I do not think there is anybody who desires such a complicated solution.

take action until the problem is solved, and once the problem is solved, the rest can donate their money to the daycare.

Does this create a reason to wait and let others solve the problem? Not necessarily. Even though you may no longer have a reason to take action if others have fixed the problem, you are still open to criticism (Cullity 2000: 19). You are criticizable for not doing what you *had* reason to do: stop dumping garbage until the problem is fixed.

If I want others to take action, I need to take action too. It all depends on what I want. We said, first of all, I do not want Robinson to drown. But, because of that desire, I will have various subsequent desires. I may want everyone to stop dumping, or I am a default member of the group that I want to stop, or I want “others” to stop (without further specification), or I want people to coordinate who will stop, or that everyone stops until the problem is solved.

I might have these desires more or less explicitly. I might not fully know or understand that dumping garbage threatens Robinson’s survival. But given that I do not want him to drown, I want what is needed to avoid this. What if I am unaware of his existence, and therefore have no subsequent desires at all? In sections 6 and 7, I will suggest that this is not particularly relevant. The important thing is that I do not want other people causing *me* to drown.

5. Nefsky’s challenges

To clarify the proposal, let us consider Nefsky’s challenges: the Superfluity Problem and the Disconnect Problem. Nefsky (2015) shows that the problem is much more complicated than one might think at first glance.

Nefsky illustrates the Superfluity Problem with an application of virtue ethics, which states that dumping garbage would be selfish and paying for garbage disposal would be virtuous. But, if paying for garbage disposal is a mere waste, then it is not virtuous, it is foolish (Nefsky 2015: 265).

The Disconnect Problem is that you can also try to be virtuous by doing something else – for example, putting up posters to draw attention to Robinson’s situation – without changing your behavior (since that makes no difference). However, we are not looking for reasons to put up posters, but for reasons to *specifically* not dump your garbage. For only if enough people stop dumping can Robinson be saved.

Nefsky adds that these problems *can* be solved, though by assuming that your conduct is instrumentally significant after all. For example, if your contribution would be helpful, but you refuse to do it, then *that* could explain why you are being selfish. However, in such a case the non-instrumental solution presupposes an independent (instrumental) one. And if we already have an instrumental solution, it is unclear why we need more solutions.

The question is: are such instrumental assumptions *really* needed? As I see it, the proposed account does not need them. In terms of universalization, the

Superfluity Problem asks: if dumping is insignificant, why should it be considered an unfair exception?

As we said, you are making an exception for yourself by allowing yourself something you do not want others to do. In Robinson's case, I want others not to dump their garbage in the lake. I want this even when I know that not dumping a single bag is insignificant. I do want others not to do things that *collectively* have bad consequences, even if they do not individually.

The Disconnect Problem: does the account yield specifically reasons not to dump garbage? What I want others to do is to stop dumping garbage, and I therefore have reason to do that myself. In the unlikely event that posters will motivate others to stop dumping, then I might also want people to put up posters. But I do not *merely* want people to put up posters. For if everyone just puts up posters and does not stop dumping, the problem will not be solved.

6. The victim's perspective

So far, we assumed that you do not want Robinson to drown, and discussed what followed from this. If you care about him, you want the problem solved. But what if you do not care? Perhaps you do not know him. In that case, you may not want other people to stop dumping. Would you then be allowed to dump your garbage?

Alternatively, would it be possible to *drop* your desire (that other people stop dumping garbage) so that dumping garbage would be allowed? That would be a strange feature of the view, or even make the whole approach implausible. As Barrett and Raskoff (2023: 197) put it, callousness should not absolve people of their obligations.¹⁴

But why not? You may think: people are sick or corrupt if they do not care about others. They might not be making an exception for themselves – they are not doing what they do not want others to be doing – but there is still something wrong with them.

Yet, perhaps it is not so much that you are completely callous. It is that you would rather give up your desire to see Robinson survive than stop dumping garbage. That is not so strange. We do this all the time. We would rather give up animal welfare than stop eating meat. The worry is that our duties cannot depend on our desires in this way. Even when you do not care enough, you *should* care. Robinson

¹⁴ According to Barrett and Raskoff (2023), you should not free ride on others. In our case, garbage dumpers do not seem to be typical free riders: they do not benefit from people who stop dumping, but Robinson does. Desire-Based Universalization is not about benefiting from other people's work per se, but about wanting that other people do the work, whether it is for you or for someone else (such as Robinson).

simply matters, the thought is, regardless of whether you happen to care about him.¹⁵

In the following, I would like to explore whether there is a desire-based solution to this problem. Of course, we *could* import the assumption that you should care about other people and have corresponding desires, but in that case, we can skip Desire-Based Universalization altogether.

One interesting idea is that we should not just look at your current desires, but also at the desires you *would* have if you were a victim of the collective harm. Most people would care about some collective harm to which they contribute if it would affect *them*. In Robinson's case, you still want others not to let *you* drown. You would want people to stop dumping *if you were in Robinson's shoes*.

To involve this broader set of desires, we could follow these steps:

Step 1

Imagine that you were in Robinson's situation.

Step 2

Imagine that others would dump their garbage.

How could you have been in Robinson's situation? You could have lived on his island. Alternatively, your current house could have been a hazard if too many others had dumped all their garbage around it. This step involves putting yourself in the victim's shoes.

Alternatively, we could also invoke a "veil of ignorance" and think of it as not knowing if you are a victim of the collective harm you are contributing to. It asks you to recognize the possibility of being in the victim's situation, that you could have been such a victim.¹⁶

For the rest, we keep fixed all your desires, such as the desire that you do not want your house to be flooded. Since you find yourself in Robinson's situation (as per step 1), you determine that you do not want others to dump their garbage (in step 2). Note that the addition of step 1 is not intended to change Desire-Based Universalization. As I will explain in the next section, it is a useful tool for applying the view in the right way.

¹⁵ A similar problem arises for the integrity account, which says that you should act in line with your concerns (Wieland 2026: section 4). What if you would rather drop your concerns, if you have them at all?

¹⁶ Rawls appealed to the veil of ignorance in his interpretation of Kant's formula of universal law (2000: 172-6). In Rawls's account, you must abstract from your actual situation, and consider whether "true human needs" are being met behind the veil. These human needs include food and rest (which arguably require protection from climate change). Not knowing whether these needs are met, you determine how people should act to secure them. For Rawls, then, your desires are irrelevant.

Step 1 is redundant in two scenarios: if you already care about the victims of the given collective harm, or if you are one of those victims. For example, if you drive a fossil car and contribute to the air pollution in your own city, you will suffer from the pollution yourself. In such a case, there is no need to imagine that you could have been the victim. You *are* one.

In other cases, such a step could make a difference. In the case of climate change, some parts of the planet suffer more from climate change than other parts, and future generations will suffer more than current generations. If you are lucky enough not to be a climate victim, and also do not necessarily care about them, then the first step becomes relevant.

Applied to this case, we imagine that many previous generations had emitted as much CO₂ as we do today. This is a much more extreme situation than the actual world, where we would have suffered severe climate harms ourselves. It is perhaps not that you want *current* people to act differently than you do, but you still want *past* people to act differently than you do. Alternatively, you want *current* people to act differently *if you were to exist in the future*.

What if climate harms cannot bother you at all? There will be few people who will not care if their house is flooded, or destroyed by a hurricane, or if they have nothing left to eat because the harvest has failed due to extreme weather. Still, you might think the benefit – protection from climate change – is not worth the cost of changing your lifestyle. Of course, you might fool yourself and be irrational. But if you are not, then you do not make an unfair exception for yourself. There will be few such cases, and I think we can set them aside.

That you could be a victim of the collective harm (that you cause with others) is more or less likely, or purely hypothetical. In the former case, the victim could have been you. Climate change may be a case in point. You could have been a climate victim if you were born later, or elsewhere on the planet.

Alternatively, you are simply being asked to put yourself in the victim's shoes, even if this is unlikely to happen in the real world. In Robinson's case, you want people not to dump their garbage because you yourself would not want to drown *if you were in Robinson's situation*. It may be very unlikely that you would live on his island, but that is irrelevant.

Animal suffering in factory farms could also be an example of this type. We should not eat meat because we want others not to eat meat (so that the factory farms must close), and we want this if we care about these animals or *if we were raised in a factory farm for slaughter* (which, again, is unlikely). This is just to illustrate the contours of applying Desire-Based Universalization, and details regarding animals and future generations would have to be worked out. For this chapter, I will stick with the Robinson case.

7. False positives

Collective harms not only have victims, but may also have beneficiaries. Imagine that Robinson is a rich person who has two estranged cousins as heirs. In fact, these cousins want people to dump their garbage so that Robinson will die, and they will inherit his fortune.

In terms of this case, I would like to address two related concerns. First, why should we imagine that we are Robinson instead of these cousins? Why not put ourselves in the cousins' shoes instead? Second, would it be permissible to dump garbage as long as you want others to dump it? The cousins want other people to dump garbage, and are not making an exception for themselves, it seems, according to Desire-Based Universalization. This would be a *reductio* of the view. It seems that one's reasons cannot depend on what people arbitrarily want.

A promising response to this problem starts from the observation that Robinson's cousins still don't want other people dumping garbage around *their* house, making *their* house a hazard, or people killing *them* for their inheritance. If they contribute to these problems for Robinson, they are still making an unfair exception for themselves in these ways.

Let us compare the general problem of false positives for universalization tests. I want people not to exploit *Dutch people*. Would it then be permissible to exploit migrant workers? I want others not to discriminate against Dutch people. Is it then permissible to discriminate against foreigners?

An example of a tricky false positive, discussed by Korsgaard (1985: 28), is the case of someone who intends to kill children who tend to cry at night in order to get enough sleep. If everyone would kill *children* who tend to cry at night, *you* would be able to get enough sleep.

I would like to suggest the following. You still want *others* not to kill you when you might bother or disturb them, and in this way you are still making an unfair exception for yourself.

Generally, you cannot game universalization tests by specifying "others" in such a way that you are not included. Desire-Based Universalization only works as a proper universalization test if we specify "others" (in the antecedent "if I want others to act in a certain way") in a sufficiently general way. If this description is too specific – for example, we are only imagining that everyone exploits migrant workers – then we cannot test if you are making an unfair exception for yourself. Clearly, you do not want migrant workers or anyone else to exploit *you*, and so you would still be making an unfair exception for yourself if you wanted to exploit *them*.¹⁷

This point also applies to our case. If we are only imagining that people contribute to *Robinson's* problems, then we are not adequately testing whether we make unfair exceptions for ourselves.

¹⁷ Herman (1993: ch. 4) suggested that we need "rules of moral salience" to describe people's maxims at the right level of specificity. In our example, the term "migrant" would not morally significant, and morally competent agents should recognize this.

This is where the victim perspective, described in the previous section, is helpful. We ask victims, “How would you want people to behave?” The response is that they do not want to suffer from the given collective harm, and so want people not to bring it about.

I do not want people to contribute to collective harms that affect *me*, and so, following Desire-Based Universalization, I should not contribute to collective harms that affect *other people*. If you contribute to collective harms that only affect other people, you are unfair in the exact same way. You are allowing yourself something – contributing to collective harms that affect others – that you do not want other people to do – contributing to collective harms that affect you.

This approach seems to entail reasons not to contribute to *any* collective harm. In the final part of the chapter, I will discuss two qualifications regarding opportunity costs and the strength of reasons.

8. Opportunity costs

Changing our ways is expensive. There are often many other things we could be doing with our money and time. If we add up the total cost of everyone’s garbage disposal, this is a significant amount. At 1 euro per bag, people could save a total of 31 million euros by dumping their garbage into the lake. This money could be used, for example, to help many children who are at risk of becoming criminals not to become so.

In response, we could imagine that the case involves more victims (e.g., more people living on Robinson’s island, and more creatures living in and around the lake). We could also imagine that garbage disposal is free, and only takes some effort.¹⁸ At some point, avoiding the harm is worth the costs.

Desire-Based Universalization might actually yield reasons to donate the money. After all, not helping others will also amount to making an unfair exception for yourself. However, what can you do with 1 euro? Is there a way to collect the money and use it for a good cause? If not, there seems to be no reason to donate it.

In case there is such a collective strategy, and the lives of the victims are not worth the total cost, there seems to be no reason to stop dumping. In such a case, though, you also do not *want* people to stop. And if you want others to donate the money instead, then according to Desire-Based Universalization, you should do so as well.

Finally, consider opportunity costs which apply only in special circumstances. Suppose I could use the euro to buy a birthday card for my friend who is having a hard time and would really benefit from it. On Desire-Based Universalization, it is

¹⁸ There are cases that do not require money. An example is getting a freely available vaccine to protect vulnerable groups (Bernstein and Navin 2023).

fine to use it for this purpose as long as you allow others to use it for that purpose. Arguably, however, you do not want others to contribute to collective harms that affect you in order to buy birthday cards.

9. Strength of reasons

Finally, let us revisit the Significance Problem (raised in section 2). Are the reasons not to contribute to collective harms strong enough, and not easily overridden by reasons to do something else with your money or time? I will first explain Gunnemyr's (2026) instrumental account, and then contrast it with what a proponent of Desire-Based Universalization could say.

To illustrate Gunnemyr's proposal, let us take a simple collective harm case, where the threshold is set at 1,000. If 1,000 people act, a bad outcome is triggered. In such a case, reasons not to contribute would be 1/1,000 as strong as the reason not to single-handedly bring about the bad outcome.¹⁹ If there are 1,000 victims, the reason not to contribute will be as strong as the reason not to single-handedly harm one victim. That is strong enough to outweigh most opportunity costs. You have a stronger reason not to harm one victim than to get a coffee (for example).

Contrast Robinson's case. Your bag is insufficient to kill Robinson. 31,654,882 more bags will be needed. According to this approach, your reason not to contribute will be 1/31,654,883 as strong as the reason not to single-handedly cause Robinson's death. This yields a very weak reason. If Robinson has, say, 40 more years to live, then the reason not to dump a bag is comparable to the reason not to waste 40 seconds of his time (or to shorten his life by 40 seconds).²⁰

In such cases – cases with many more contributors than victims – reasons not to contribute to collective harms will be weak, and may be overridden by reasons to get the coffee. For example, the number of marketable goods from a single pig can exceed 1,000 items. This means that your reason for not buying one of these goods would be at most 1/1,000 as strong as your reason for not slaughtering the pig yourself. It is an open question what the contributor/victim ratio is in real-life cases, and whether Gunnemyr's instrumental reasons will be strong enough.

Desire-Based Universalization's approach to this question is entirely different. Why not spend the money on a coffee, as long as paying for disposal is a waste of money? It is that I do not want other people to get coffee and continue to contribute to the collective harms that affect me. Given that, I should not do it either.

This applies to a wide range of opportunity costs. I do not want people to continue to dump for coffees, for birthday cards, or for much else. As long as

¹⁹ I am applying the sufficiency measure (how sufficient one's action is for the harm), and set aside several qualifications. Gunnemyr also discusses the necessity measure (how necessary one's action is for the harm). We cannot apply the latter here, given that we do not know how many people will dump their garbage in total.

²⁰ $(40 * 365 * 24 * 60) / 31,654,883 = .66$ minute

avoiding the collective harm is worth the total cost (i.e., the sum of the costs that people have to pay in order to avoid the collective harm), I want people to pay these costs. For example, the problems in factory farms seem to be far worse than the benefits people get from them. That is why there is a problem in the first place: people are trapped in a suboptimal outcome (Wieland et al. 2026).

People are not always trapped. As noted, if we could collect the money that is needed to save Robinson and use this for some good cause, then we might prefer that to saving Robinson. There will also be cases in which the victims themselves would prefer to have the money needed to avoid the collective harm that affects them rather than not to suffer from it in the first place. In many cases, however, avoiding the collective harm *is* worth the total cost, and I want people to pay these costs.

Sometimes there are special opportunity costs. You may not have time to take the bag to the dump because someone urgently needs your help. Such special reasons might be universalizable. As long as you allow others to dump their garbage for such specific reasons, it is permissible to do so yourself. In addition, you also want to be helped when you are in dire need, and so, following Desire-Based Universalization, you should offer help.

I want others to help me when I am in need, not to make false promises to me, not to jump the queues I am standing in, and so on. If I want those things, then I should not make an unfair exception for myself in all these ways. It should be the same weighty factor that should enter into my deliberations.

It is an open question if these reasons – not to make an unfair exception for oneself – can be stronger or weaker. One potentially relevant factor is the strength of your desire for others to act in a certain way. The stronger your desire that others not jump queues, the stronger your reason not to jump queues. Why? The more you hate for others to do something, the more unfair it would be for you to do it yourself.

This could also apply to our cases. Some things are more important to us than others. For example, I have a stronger desire not to drown than to have people not jump the queues I am standing in. I would then have a stronger reason not to contribute to scenarios where people's lives are at risk than a reason not to jump queues (all other things being equal). But either way, it is meant to function as a weighty factor that should feature in my deliberations.

10. Conclusion

Why should individuals stop contributing to collective harms if this is a waste of effort? In this chapter, I developed a non-instrumental solution in terms of desire-based universalization: we should act because we want others to act, and we should not make an unfair exception for ourselves. I discussed the case where people do not seem to have the relevant desires, and suggested that they still want people not to contribute to collective harms that would affect *them*. Finally, I offered an argument that the reasons based on these desires are strong enough.

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