

Kantian climate activism

“I don’t have to eat less meat, because it makes no difference.”

“You do need to eat less meat, because it does make a difference.”

Two opposing positions. *Who is right?*

Neither. As far as I’m concerned, both sides go wrong. You should eat less meat, but not because it would make a difference.

Contamination theory

We’re all familiar with the discussion. Fill in for “eat less meat” other things like “fly less,” “buy less,” “use green energy,” “protest bad climate policies,” “vote for better policies,” etc.

Climate activists point out that your behavior does make a difference. Bregman defended the “contamination theory”, namely that “if you buy a vegan schnitzel or participate in a climate demonstration, you also influence people you will never meet.” He even wrote: “Actually, you have to have a hyper-individualistic view of humanity to think that as an individual you can’t make a difference.”

It’s nice if your solar panels have inspired your neighbors to get them too. Great if you were able to convince your colleagues to switch to a more sustainable pension fund. Or that Greta was able to convince her mother to go vegan.

However, that’s not the difference we’re looking for. The difference we are looking for is a difference *in climate harms*. That because of your behavior, people will suffer less from droughts, floods, and extreme weather. And that difference is simply unlikely.

The contamination theory may well be correct, but just infecting others – with no one any less likely to suffer climate harms – is not what we should be doing it for.

Tragedy

You may have picked up the term “the tragedy of the commons” somewhere. But it’s good to see exactly what that tragedy is.

In one sentence: for yourself it is *always* best not to change your behavior.

Check for yourself: there are two possible scenarios: (A) enough people stick to the comfortable life they are used to (e.g. eat meat), or (B) enough people adjust their behavior.

	(A) Enough others don't change their behavior	(B) Enough others change their behavior
I don't change my behaviour	Climate harms	Climate harms are avoided
I change my behaviour	Climate harms + costs for me	Climate harms are avoided + costs for me

In scenario (A) too few people adjust their behavior. I then have two choices: keep going like everyone else, or adjust my behavior. In this case, I would adjust my behavior for nothing. There are climate harms anyway, and I would only be wasting money and effort. Why still switch to renewable energy if it's more expensive?

In scenario (B) enough people already adjust their behavior. I have the same choices again: keep going, or adjust my behavior as well. In this case, it is still better not to adjust anything. Climate harms are avoided anyway, and I'm just wasting costs again with my good intentions. If enough others reduce their emissions, my flight or hamburger won't cause any climate harms.

In short: in either case it is better for me to do nothing. Yet: *exactly the same reasoning applies to everyone else involved*. And if we *all* do nothing, we end up in scenario (A). That's the tragedy.

Important: the problem is not that I don't care about climate harms. On the contrary. *I care quite a bit*. The problem is that climate harms depend on what very large groups do, not on what *I* do.

In *How Are We Going to Explain This?*, Mommers endorses this point: "based on figures alone, it makes no difference whether or not you prevent CO₂ emissions, since your share is negligible among a total of 7.8 billion people."

But that's just the point: it's all about the numbers. Or better: it's about the actual impact you have on the climate. Not about the impact on the circle of people you know, and whether you manage to convince your mother to eat only plants.

Now what if you know a lot of people? Suppose the prime minister holds a press conference in which he calls on everyone to take their responsibility regarding climate change. Or better, imagine Trump doing that. Trump encourages everyone to eat plant-based burgers.

Yet, from this it follows at best that Trump has reason for activism, not us. What we do has zero impact.

We don't book that plane, or abandon that hamburger, and climate harms are not going to be reduced one millimeter. Even if we spend our entire lives plant-based, and we infect a few others with that same behavior, our society will only produce more meat.

Thinking that you are setting a chain in motion with your behavior, toward a better world, is vain hope at best.

You're making no difference, so what?

So not every little bit helps. Indeed, all the little bits help nothing at all. *Now what?*

That Shell and KLM should just fix the problem? Or the government? Maybe that too. But certainly not only that. You still shouldn't book that flight, or order that hamburger, etc.

This too Immanuel Kant discovered, in slightly different form, and some centuries ago:

Imagine that you can get money from Johnny by making him a promise that you will pay it back soon, when you have no intention of doing so at all. Also imagine for a moment that Johnny can spare the money, and is otherwise quite forgetful, so that no one will notice that you lied. Your lie will make no difference in such a situation; it will only make you money.

Still, you shouldn't do it. Why? Lying is not – here it comes – *universalizable*. If everyone would lie, then no one would trust each other, and you wouldn't be able to get money with a lie anymore. You would want others to believe you, so you assume that others act differently from you. You assume that you are more important than others. You aren't.

If Kant's case doesn't convince, consider paying taxes. The problem is exactly as before. Even if you very much want public goods (dikes, roads, drinking water, health care, education, and so on), it is always more advantageous for you not to contribute to them (check in the table below).

But, again, the same reasoning applies to everyone. And if everyone avoids taxes, there are no public goods. Tragedy!

	Enough others avoid tax	Enough others pay tax
I avoid tax	No collective goods	Collective goods
I pay tax	No collective goods + costs for me	Collective goods + costs for me

Why pay tax even though it makes no difference? Because tax avoidance is not universalizable. If everyone avoided tax, there would be no public goods. But you very much want them. You benefit daily from dikes, roads, drinking water, etc. In short, you want others to pay taxes, but not yourself, and in doing so, you again put yourself above others.

Likewise with flying and eating meat. In a world where everyone has continued to emit more and more CO₂ for centuries, you yourself would suffer serious climate harms. You would wish that previous generations had reduced their emissions. You make an unfair exception for yourself by not drastically reducing your own emissions.

The Kantian turn

This may be hard to grasp. It is so natural to think that you should only do something if it pays off. “So we should eat less meat even though this makes no difference?” Exactly.

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Jan Willem Wieland
j.j.w.wieland@vu.nl

This piece is translated from Dutch:
“Kantiaans klimaatactivisme”, *Bij nader inzien*, 2020
<https://bijnaderinzien.com/2020/12/21/kantiaans-klimaatactivisme/>

Academic paper in English:
“Cooperation – Kantian-Style”, *Inquiry*, 2024
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2312215>

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Admittedly, the claim – that we should eat less meat or fly less even though this makes no difference – is not easy to grasp. It’s so natural to think that you should act in some way only if doing so pays off. To make the thought more intelligible, I have asked Yormie Aboe Dzaki to present it in the form of a short story. Sometimes philosophical ideas are so abstract that they call for something that makes them visible. The tale features someone – Tony/Rico – who’s on the right track, morally speaking, even though he fails to make a difference.

In Dutch:
“Loslaten”, *HetMoet*, 2022
<https://www.hetmoet.com/post-1/loslaten>

[English version](#)