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16 Minimal requirements of beneficence for collective impact problems

Tijn Milan Smits

1 Introduction

The inefficacy problem arises when a group of agents has a collective impact, even though no individual agent can make a difference. This inability of one's personal impact to make a morally relevant difference can seemingly not generate (sufficiently strong) reasons for action.[1] Yet, acting collectively would have positive results. Many of us share the intuition that agents nonetheless have good reasons to take action in these Collective Impact Problems (CIPs). Urgent moral questions revolve around such problems, potentially informing many of our day-to-day decisions. For example, many of us believe that people have good reasons to stop flying, adopt a vegan diet, and buy fewer items to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in light of global warming. Some of us would even argue that people have an *obligation* to take such actions. The question, however, is what the reasons could be for taking actions that will not significantly affect the problem's outcome.

Responses to the inefficacy problem can be instrumentalist or non-instrumentalist (Nefsky 2023: 40). Instrumentalists aim to demonstrate that individual actions do play an instrumentally significant role in establishing the collective impact (Kagan 2011). Non-instrumentalists give other reasons for actions than their instrumental significance, such as a person's moral integrity or fairness toward other contributors. These theories can avoid the instrumentalist burden of proving an action's significance. Although non-instrumentalist solutions are compatible with actions having that significance, they would have to show why they are necessary to provide reasons for action in that scenario.

The inefficacy problem is most obviously a challenge for consequentialists. After all, a theory that evaluates the moral worth of an action by its outcome struggles to provide reasons for an action that does not significantly affect the outcome. Non-consequentialist answers are prima facie attractive. I have previously argued for a Kantian approach in climate ethics,

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particularly as a foundation for the fair shares approach, in part because of its potential to address the inefficacy problem (Smits 2026).[2] Here, I will outline the structure of such a Kantian solution to the inefficacy problem, suitable for CIPs in general, and demonstrate how it can navigate some challenges that plague non-instrumentalists and Kantians in particular.

The Kantian approach I take starts from the obligatory end of beneficence (MM: 6:385).[3] This obligatory end gives rise to the imperfect duty to promote others' happiness. That is, one should help other agents further their rationally set goals and meet their true needs. The strategy of this approach is to trace a chain from the end of beneficence to the required actions, demonstrating that doing one's part in solving the problem is *the only way* to act out of proper concern for others' ends.[4] The gap between the general end of beneficence and the taking of particular actions in CIPs can be bridged by required commitments (Wieland 2026a: section 4). One should be committed to combating CIPs to be considered beneficent, which entails binding oneself to the collective solution. The only way to honor one's commitment is to perform one's part of the solution.

The argument formulated in this chapter serves as a blueprint for a line of argumentation. Because the aim is to provide a solution suitable for a wide range of CIPs, particular cases will raise follow-up questions that merit further discussion. I will discuss global warming and the fictitious example *Drops of Water*, representing collective harm and collective rescue cases, respectively. But how to apply the approach to other problems will depend on the details of each case. For example, it will depend on the case at hand whether it is really *required* to commit to combating the problem or whether it would be *virtuous*. In some cases of collective harm, we may also derive more straightforward perfect duties. In other cases, the collective solution may be too unclear, requiring a supplementary case for coordination or specifying which segment of the relevant agents must act (Andreou 2026).

I will address two sets of objections as the leading challenges for the argument: the superfluity and disconnect problems Nefsky raises for non-instrumentalist solutions, and the latitude problems Ananiev raises for the obligatory ends approach in particular.

Nefsky (2023) argues that non-instrumentalist solutions must rely on instrumentalism to become reason-giving. The superfluity problem presses non-instrumentalists on whether the moral reasons of their theory apply to the case: it is unclear why an action X can count as Y (e.g., "helping") if it is superfluous in bringing about the outcome. It seems like you are not *doing* anything morally relevant at all. The disconnect problem raises the question of why non-instrumentalist reasons for action would not generate the same reasons for disconnected actions, and if they do, whether the provided reasons connect to the problem in the right way. We are seeking reasons to

perform actions that collectively yield good results, but these reasons may also support disconnected actions. Why does someone count as more committed to combating global warming by taking the train instead of flying than by flying and holding a sign that says "I am against global warming," if neither makes a difference?

The second set of objections targets the obligatory ends approach specifically by questioning whether the imperfect duties it generates can sufficiently guide action. Imperfect duties constrain practical deliberation. They express ends that should be salient in determining how we act. But these ends will not move us to action at every opportunity. Imperfect duties are limited by perfect duties (MM: 6:390). But Kantians disagree on how to understand the latitude we have in fulfilling imperfect duties when they compete with our personal ends.[5] The "when" and "how" of discharging an imperfect duty are generally left to the agent's judgment. On this basis, Ananiev (2023, 2026) argues in this volume and elsewhere that an agent is not bound to combat particular problems (I will call this "higher level latitude"), nor bound to perform specific actions when combating a problem (I will call this "lower level latitude"). Thus, these latitude objections question whether an obligatory ends approach could condemn inaction in a CIP.

In the next section, I will explain why the end of beneficence holds unconditionally and what it means to help on Kantian grounds: it means treating others, and specifically their rational capacity to set ends, as valuable. Then, I will argue that the duty to help implies a commitment to combating paradigmatic CIPs. Not being committed qualifies as non-beneficent or indifferent, and this is impermissible. In the last section, I will argue that a commitment to combating a CIP implies binding oneself to its collective solution. The only way to honor this commitment is to do one's part. Thus, proper commitment to the beneficence of others should lead all the way to action. Not because such action makes a difference, but because it is indispensable in adopting the ends of others.

2 The unconditional duty to help

One virtue of a Kantian approach is that its prescriptions are unconditional. Human agency has two facets, according to a Kantian picture. On the one hand, people have contingent, personal desires that they want to fulfill. On the other hand, people have a capacity for rationality that goes beyond its instrumental use (efficiently connecting means to ends) and prescribes certain ends as objectively valuable. Moral norms hold for everyone, as they stem from our shared rational nature. These moral norms constrain our personal goals.

Moral constraints come in two varieties. Perfect duties directly constrain action. They prescribe actions that an agent must (or must not) take

on every occasion. Imperfect duties are constraints on deliberation and indirectly on action. They prescribe ends that an agent must adopt. Kant recognizes two obligatory ends: one's own perfection and the happiness of others (MM: 6:385).

A perfect duty cannot be derived in many CIPs where the well-being of others is at risk.[6] Perfect duties revolve around intrinsically immoral actions. CIPs arise from the pattern of action of many agents. Typically, singular instances of these actions are not problematic. Not every action that emits greenhouse gases must be omitted to sufficiently limit global warming. For this reason, Albertzart (2019) argues that we should instead appeal to the obligatory end of promoting the happiness of others for these "extrinsic" moral problems.[7] I believe this strategy also works well for CIPs where we aim to make a positive impact, such as rescuing others, rather than avoiding harm.

Let me first show why the imperfect duty to help holds unconditionally, based on the categorical imperatives' formula of universal law and formula of humanity. I will not enter into interpretive debates about the relations or justifications of the formulas. I aim to show that if one accepts either of the two, the imperfect duty to help follows with minimal assumptions. One could also arrive at the obligatory end of beneficence in other Kantian or non-Kantian ways, but I will stick to this rendering of the Kantian position. Then, I will contrast this approach with Wieland's alternative answer to the inefficacy problem, which uses universalization but is conditional on preferences, to highlight some advantages of a Kantian approach that prescribes unconditional ends.

The formula of universal law is *formal*, prescribing a form of willing maxims*:* "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (G: 4:421). On Kleingeld's (2017) volitional self-contradiction reading, the relevant question an agent should ask in deliberation is whether they can *simultaneously* will their maxim *and* their maxim in the form of a universal law. Some maxims fail the test because they cannot function as a universal law at all, leading to a contradiction in conception. Other maxims could function as a universal law, but they cannot be willed in a universal form *while* being willed privately, leading to a contradiction in the will. Contradictions in conception give rise to perfect duties, while contradictions in the will result in imperfect duties.

Based on Kleingeld's (2023) analysis of the duty of beneficence, I believe there are two assumptions one has to accept to derive this unconditional duty from the formula of universal law (512). First, human beings necessarily will things. People have ends, ranging from big aspirations to basic needs like food and water. All of these personal ends can be summed up under the overarching end of pursuing happiness.[8] Second, human beings

are not self-sufficient. We do not know what ends we will have in the future, and cannot gather the means for all these possible ends independently of others.

Based on these assumptions, Kant bases the egoist's maxim on someone who wants help but does not want to give it (G: 4:423). A maxim of egoism leads to a contradiction in the will, as one cannot simultaneously will receiving without giving help, and for *everyone* (which includes oneself) to will receiving without giving help (Kleingeld 2023: 514). This is a flat-out contradiction. Because this maxim of egoism is impermissible, one must instead adopt a maxim of beneficence. That is, one has an imperfect duty to help others.

One may object that this is a specific type of egoism: an egoist who still *wants* help. What if someone does not want to receive help or prefers to drop their desire for help over helping others? The point is that one cannot will not to receive help. All egoists share the maxim of wanting to receive but not give help. We *must* wish to receive the open-ended help of others. As Herman (1984) emphasizes, this is not a prudential calculation, but indicates a limit to what we can rationally will: we cannot rationally forgo a condition of our agency itself (584). Therefore, we cannot simply abandon the need to receive help and are bound to help others.

The formula of humanity is *substantive*. It singles out humanity as a property with moral value: "so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (G: 4:429). Humanity refers to the rational nature of human beings that affords people dignity. People set ends through the exercise of their rational capacities. The formula of humanity demands that we respect people and their ends. The formula comprises two sub-principles: a prohibition on using people merely as a means, resulting in perfect duties, and a requirement to treat people positively as ends in themselves, resulting in imperfect duties (Formosa 2014: 6).

Thus, our maxims should neither conflict with the value of humanity nor fail to harmonize with it. The obligatory end to promote the happiness of others follows from the fact that if human beings are valuable due to their rational capacities, the ends that follow from these capacities are objectively valuable as well (Formosa 2014: 21). Therefore, we have an imperfect duty to further the ends of others (as long as the ends of others do not conflict with the ends of morality).

This derivation from the formula of humanity points nicely to what we should exactly promote. A duty of promoting happiness may sound strange, since happiness as such has no moral value according to Kantians. Yet people's rational end-setting capacity is valuable and must therefore be respected and supported. Since all set ends are hierarchically ordered under the overarching end of happiness, we promote people's happiness

when we help them achieve their goals (G: 4:415). The duty of beneficence does not entail simply satisfying other people's desires, but, as Herman (1984) says, "what I support is the other's active and successful pursuit of his self-defined goals," particularly by "contributing to the meeting of his true needs when that is not within his power" (601).

The next salient question is how this general duty to help others applies to CIPs. Particularly, can we determine when and how one should help? I will address this in the next section, but first, let me contrast the foundations of the approach with Wieland's alternative solution to the inefficacy problem, grounded in Kantian universalizability but conditional on one's preferences. In this volume, Wieland (2026b) argues for an original two-step procedure of universalization. The first step fixes our preferences. If we already care about the CIP's victim, or if we would care *if* we were in the victim's shoes, we want the problem solved. The second step states that if we want the problem solved, we want others to act in a collectively good way. Because we should not make an exception for ourselves, we should also act in a collectively good way.

Wieland's proposal provides reasons for action derived from one's preferences. As long as someone wants or would want the problem to be addressed, they are bound to be a part of the solution, based on a principle of impartiality that demands making no unfair exceptions for ourselves. The proposal tests for desires in particular cases ("Would I want to receive help if I were the victim of global warming?").

In contrast, Kantians test the general maxim of wanting to receive help but not to give it. A salient aspect of our agency is the uncertainty about our future goals and whether we can achieve them on our own. The open-endedness of our end-setting implies that needing help *in general* is a condition of our agency.

Wieland's proposal has the advantage of directly specifying the need to take action in those cases. The downside of the approach, I believe, is that it generates conditional duties. The problem lies not in its *extension*: almost all agents would care if they were in the victim's shoes and are thus bound to the solution. Yet, there is a problem with the normative *foundation* of basing duties on desires.

First, testing for the desire to receive help in particular cases has the counterintuitive result that I must help others based on what *I want* or *would want*. Instead, on the Kantian picture, the extent of my duty to help is based on *your needs*. Herman (1984) describes this as a community of "mutual aid." While beneficence is reciprocal, needs may differ within this community. My obligation to respond to others' claims does not depend on whether I would ever make such a claim of need myself. It would be problematic if the best-off agents were obligated to give the least help because they *want* the least help. I believe this result stems from Wieland's

account, which only abstracts away from the question of whether someone is a victim of the problem at hand. It does not abstract away from the other means that inform how someone can deal with the relevant problem, and one's other desires that are informed by one's social position. If I did not want help as the victim of the problem at hand, because I have other means to take care of myself, this should not release me from the duty to help victims.

Second, the Kantian approach asserts that you simply ought to care about others. This care is not affective but a recognition of the unconditional value of others. Wieland acknowledges the force of this point, referring to an example of Robinson, who sits on an island and will drown if too many people dump their waste into the lake surrounding him:

> 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 simply matters, the thought is, regardless of whether you happen to care about him.
>
> (Wieland 2026b: 298)

Yet, Wieland's account does not say that you should care about Robinson full stop. It only says that you should care about Robinson *if* you would care about yourself in his position. Many people would care about themselves, and thus should care about Robinson. However, the point is that you should care *about Robinson*. He is a human being with dignity, and Robinson's fate matters in and of itself, regardless of what I would want in his situation (though the Kantian would add: you also ought to care about yourself in such a situation).

Third, when moral obligations follow from our preferences, they directly compete with our *other* preferences. This becomes apparent in how Wieland frames the problem, which he argues lies not only in the actions' inefficacy but also in their opportunity costs. That is, we are ineffective *and* waste the ability to satisfy other preferences. We then need to explain why universalizability reasons are sufficiently strong to outweigh these opportunity costs. The use of Kantian theory is helpful here because it provides a clear framework for weighing such interests: the value of personal preferences is irrelevant when one is required to act on duty. Morality imposes constraints on the pursuit of our personal goals, regardless of the opportunity costs.

3 Commitments to combating collective impact problems

We have an unconditional duty to help others by supporting their ability to pursue morally permissible, self-defined goals and meet true needs. The next question is how this duty to help becomes salient in CIPs.

Remember the particular challenges this approach faces. First, why does performing an instrumentally significant action qualify as helping (the superfluity problem), while an equally insignificant but disconnected action does not qualify as helping (the disconnect problem)? Second, how does an imperfect duty to help require us to combat particular problems (higher-level latitude) and take specific actions (lower-level latitude)? In this section, I will outline the steps from the general duty of beneficence to the required commitment to combating particular problems. In the next section, I will discuss how this commitment should be honored through specific actions.

I will outline the approach using two paradigmatic CIPs: global warming and *Drops of Water,* respectively, representing cases in which we collectively *harm* others and collectively *rescue* them.

Global warming is arguably the most urgent collective harm problem humanity faces. The inefficacy problem is apparent here. Whether I take the train instead of the plane will make no significant difference to the rise in temperatures (and thereby, to the harm people experience). Yet our collective emissions endanger millions of lives; reducing them collectively would save those lives.

Drops of Water is a case formulated by Parfit:

> ***Drops of Water***
> Imagine that there are ten thousand men in the desert, suffering from intensely painful thirst. We are a group of ten thousand people near the desert, and each of us has a pint of water. We can't go into the desert ourselves, but what we can do is pour our pints into a water cart. The cart will be driven into the desert, and any water in it will be evenly distributed amongst the men.
>
> (Nefsky 2017: 2743–4; adapted from Parfit 1984: 76)

Again, the actions of one individual will be insignificant. My pint will make such a small difference to the experience of each of the ten thousand men that it will go unnoticed. Yet, collectively donating our pints would save the 10,000 men from the extreme thirst that threatens their health and safety.

I will argue that one must be *committed* to combating the problems of global warming and *Drops of Water*. The need to take on commitments to CIPs arises from the impermissibility of ignoring the problem. Kantians evaluate maxims of actions. If a maxim is impermissible, we must adopt its contradictory (Herman 1984: 594). Because a maxim that indicates not being committed to combating a CIP is *incompatible* with the adoption of the end of beneficence, one must adopt a maxim of *commitment*. The

commitment to combating particular CIPs is indispensable in recognizing the value of others and their well-being. The reasons for this slightly differ between the two cases. Not being committed to combating global warming (and similar cases of collective harm) constitutes *non-beneficence*. Not being committed to combating the problem of *Drops of Water* (and similar collective rescue cases) constitutes *indifference*. Non-beneficence and indifference are incompatible with the end of beneficence. Let me spell out these arguments in more detail.

First, I will argue that one must be committed to combating global warming (and similar cases of collective harm) because failing to do so constitutes non-beneficence, which is impermissible. By non-beneficence in this context, I do not mean a principled refusal to help others. It is conceivable that one is willing to help others at times while being unwilling to help combat global warming. By non-beneficence, I mean that one acts on a maxim of *hindering* the practical rational activity of others, that is, their setting and acting on ends. Therefore, one cannot adopt the maxim of "not combating global warming" while adopting the end of beneficence.

Presumably, most agents do not consciously adopt a maxim of "not combating global warming." The formulation of maxims in CIPs is a complex matter that warrants a more thorough treatment (Wieland 2024). For now, I would like to say that an agent should ask during practical deliberation what goals they are trying to achieve and what their policy of action is. When an agent critically reviews whether they are committed to global warming, they may realize they are actually acting unconsciously on a maxim of "not combating global warming." Alternatively, we might say that this agent has not adopted the maxim of "combating global warming," and that not adopting the maxim of "combating global warming" is impermissible.[9]

I (2026) have previously argued for the claim that not being willing to combat global warming is incompatible with the end of beneficence, for "we cannot will the happiness of others while willing to make their place of living uninhabitable" (5). Ananiev (2026) agrees with this. Despite being critical of the overall approach, he is sympathetic to the idea that combating extremely urgent collective harm problems, such as global warming, is indispensable to adopting the end of beneficence. I want to clarify that it is not merely the felt urgency of global warming that makes it indispensable, but rather the structural features of beneficence.

The end of beneficence compels us to further the practical rational activity of other agents by helping them to achieve their goals, especially their true needs. Global warming renders the pursuit of self-defined goals and the fulfillment of true needs impossible for vast groups of agents. Habitable land is a precondition of pursuing one's goals. Participating in global warming and refusing to combat it undermines this precondition. A maxim

of "not combating global warming" is impermissible because it is based on making the rational pursuit of goals impossible for others. This active undermining of the precondition of rational agency is incompatible with the end of beneficence.

While global warming exemplifies collective harm, *Drops of Water* exemplifies collective rescue. After all, the "we" in the example did not deprive the thirsty group of water. Given these differences, we require a distinct vocabulary to demonstrate why one should be committed to addressing these cases. While non-beneficence is about a maxim that entails gravely *hindering* the pursuit of ends by others, indifference involves a maxim whereby one does not give sufficient *weight* to the ends of others. Both the former active and the latter passive wrongs are incompatible with the end of beneficence. I will argue that failing to commit to collective rescue cases, such as *Drops of Water,* constitutes indifference. I will begin this argument with so-called easy rescue cases, in which we can act successfully on our own.

In easy rescue cases, someone can easily rescue another from great danger with little sacrifice. To simplify things, assume you are nearby and the only one who can help. Think of Singer's (1972) child in the pond example. Rescuing the drowning child is not a perfect duty in Kantian ethics. Rescue falls under the imperfect duty of beneficence. Still, many Kantians believe we are *required* to save the drowning child.

Formosa and Sticker (2018) note that "indifference acts as a baseline requirement below which we should not use scalar talk ('we are less virtuous') but binary concepts ('we are vicious, and our behavior is wrong')" (634; MM: 6:451). In virtually all circumstances, not rescuing a drowning child would qualify as indifference. This qualification does depend on one's specific maxim. Not helping a drowning child based on the maxim of "never helping others" is clearly impermissible. But I would argue that not helping a drowning child based on a maxim of "only sometimes helping others" would not exhibit a principled refusal to help, but still amount to indifference, and thus be incompatible with the end of beneficence.

The thought that not rescuing a drowning child exhibits indifference should be intuitive, but we can explain the gravity with the rationale behind the duty of beneficence. As discussed, adopting the end of beneficence requires us to further the rational self-activity of other agents and recognize the value of their ends in our practical deliberation. A situation where someone's agency itself is at risk places such a high claim on us that we cannot refuse, and as Herman (1984) says, "the fact of having done a good deed yesterday cannot weigh against that claim" (596).

There is no apparent reason why an easy rescue case that requires collective action should yield a different result. Not being committed to combating the extreme thirst that endangers the health and safety of the group

of men in *Drops of Water* should also be considered indifferent. The point here is that, *as a collective*, we have the opportunity to substantially aid a group of people with minimal effort (by all of us donating our pints).[10] Bringing up a good deed from yesterday does nothing to waive that claim of need. Not being committed to combating their thirst would, therefore, under normal circumstances, be incompatible with the end of beneficence.

I add "under normal circumstances" because the situation could be different. If "we" also suffer from extreme thirst, face another immediate danger, or are confronted with grave claims of the needs of others, we would not give insufficient consideration to the needs of the 10,000 men if we do not commit to combating their problem. But as the case is described, we should commit.

I do not deny that imperfect duties have latitude. Rather, the account sketches *minimal requirements* for beneficence. Going beyond these minimal requirements would be virtuous. Not meeting them is impermissible. One might object, though, that if imperfect duties have latitude, a maxim of "not combating global warming" need only be avoided sometimes. In that case, we could not use this maxim as a consistent boundary to the duty of beneficence from which to derive a strict minimal requirement. This understanding of latitude would be mistaken. Kleingeld (2019) has convincingly shown that *any* maxim that contradicts the categorical imperative is impermissible. Contradicting the categorical imperative is never permitted, so latitude only obtains on the side of positive imperfect duties. Since any maxim that contradicts the categorical imperative is impermissible, a maxim of "not combating global warming" is *always* impermissible. Positively framed, one *must* be committed to combating global warming.

4 Honoring commitments through action

The next question to address is what it means to be committed to combating a problem. How should this *commitment* be reflected in *action*? This is the most difficult step for the argument. Anyone who has accepted the problem's diagnosis may agree with the argument so far that a concern for others' ends should imply a commitment to combating CIPs that threaten others' well-being, yet may resist the idea that any implications for action follow. After all, how does an instrumentally insignificant action further the ends of others? I will argue that a commitment to combating a CIP should be understood as a commitment to a collective solution. The only way to honor one's commitment is by performing one's share of this collective solution. Thus, to qualify as adopting the end of beneficence, one must do one's part in solving CIPs.

Much of the argument's success will depend on how we understand the concept of a commitment. On the one hand, a commitment to combating

a CIP should not be understood as a mere desire. A desire would not be strong enough to bring us to action. I can *wish* to combat global warming, but my actions will not make a difference. So, why bother?

On the other hand, a commitment to combating a CIP should not be understood as an intention to bring about the solution. According to Bratman (2014), an intention *to* combat a CIP is only possible if all relevant actions can be taken by me (60). But not all actions required to combat CIPs are under my control. An intention *that* a CIP is combated is only coherent if my intention at least "settles" whether the CIP is combated by affecting the decisions of others (Bratman 2014: 64). This is impossible in large, unstructured CIPs that require many agents to act.[11]

A commitment to combating a problem must be honored. Committing oneself to a problem binds oneself to a possible solution. A commitment to combat a CIP from me does not require the commitment to combat a CIP from other relevant agents (whereas a shared intention, as understood by Bratman, does make claims about the actions of others). This is not a theory of "joint commitment" either, in which each of our commitments creates certain obligations towards one another (Gilbert 2013). Instead, *I* must commit to combating the victims' problem and honor that commitment to properly acknowledge the value of their ends.

Usually, we can say that honoring a commitment to X involves taking the required action Y. This is a dictate of instrumental rationality. In Kantian language, willing a certain end involves willing its means (G: 4:417). For problems that we can solve alone, the conclusion is straightforward: if we see a drowning child, we ought to take the necessary means under our control to save them. Most likely, that means jumping in the water, although it might mean calling for help.

This principle of instrumental rationality cannot be used *directly* to move from a commitment to combating a CIP to action. If we say that honoring a commitment to combat a CIP entails taking one's share of the relevant means, then the superfluity challenge quickly arises. For instance, how can reducing my emissions be considered a *means* to the *end* of combating global warming when this action is instrumentally insignificant? If we cite a direct means–end relationship between the relevant action and the CIP, the Kantian argument presupposes an instrumental solution to the inefficacy problem.

Therefore, we need a more careful analysis. Committing to combating a CIP must involve committing to its relevant collective solution. Means–end reasoning applies at the collective level. CIPs, by their very nature, can only be combated through a collective solution. To be properly committed to combating the problem also involves committing to its collective solution.

This commitment to the collective solution must, then, move us to action. After all, if I am bound to a collective solution as part of my commitment

to combating the CIP, I must honor this commitment by performing my share of the solution. There is no alternative way of honoring my commitment to the ends of others. Because doing my part is indispensable to the adoption of the end of beneficence, failing to do my part would amount to not properly recognizing the value of the needs of others.[12]

In *Drops of Water*, the collective solution is clear. We all have to donate our pints. To be properly committed to combating the problem of *Drops of Water*, I must bind myself to the collective solution of donating our pints. To honor this commitment, I should donate my pint. For global warming, the most obvious collective solution is for us all to reduce our emissions to a sustainable, equal level, at least in the absence of collective agreements.[13] To be committed to combating global warming, I must bind myself to the collective solution and reduce my emissions to a level that is sustainable with equal use by all others.[14]

Let us assess whether the approach is well-positioned to address its biggest challenges, starting with the latitude objections. Recall that Ananiev argues that the obligatory ends approach cannot condemn particular actions like "keeping your pint," because the duty to help is imperfect: we have latitude both as to what problems we choose to combat (higher-level latitude) and how to combat them (lower-level latitude).

My approach sketches the minimal requirements of beneficence to provide more action guidance. While leaving elements of latitude intact, we can say more than that the substance of an imperfect duty is entirely up to the agent.

At least certain commitments to combating paradigmatic CIPs are indispensable in adopting the ends of others. Because acting on maxims that qualify as non-beneficent or indifferent is impermissible, we must always avoid these maxims. The only way to avoid being non-beneficent or indifferent is to commit to combating the relevant problem. We are not required to commit to CIPs where we would not count as non-beneficent or indifferent, for example, in collectively damaging a lawn by crossing it (Ananiev 2026). We still have good *reasons* to combat such CIPs, even if it is not required, since the ends of others remain salient. So, our higher-level latitude is restricted to at least being committed to combating critical CIPs.

Since a commitment to combating CIPs involves binding oneself to the collective solution and consequently requires one to perform one's share of the solution, one's lower-level latitude is restricted as well. The extent of this restriction differs between cases. When there are multiple ways to perform one's part of the collective solution, various actions can be taken. In reducing one's emissions to one's fair share, someone could stop flying, adopt a vegan diet, or buy fewer items (although in reality, most people in affluent countries ought to take all of these actions). In *Drops of Water*, the collective solution leaves only one course of action open. To honor your

commitment, you have to donate your pint. Thus, the obligatory ends approach that sketches minimal requirements for beneficence *can* condemn someone who keeps their pint.[15]

One might think that the only realistic collective solution is through political action. I am skeptical of this (Smits 2026). In *Drops of Water*, quenching the men's thirst requires all of us to donate our pint. Campaigning for pint donations without donating my pint seems inadequate to commit to the collective solution. Yet the point of this section would still stand even if one rejects the unilateral approach and opts for a requirement to work toward a political solution: we are required to act on our commitment to the collective solution, and our latitude is restricted to the relevant solution.[16]

One may also object that, on my account, imperfect duties become too demanding. Most of us are implicated in many grave collective harms, from global warming to exploitation in the production of the goods we consume. Our commitment to helping may also be required for a range of worldwide collective rescue opportunities, aimed at saving people from poverty and famine. I do believe that taking the end of beneficence seriously entails high demands in a world full of suffering. And while our perfect duties of protecting ourselves and those near to us limit the requirements of the imperfect duty to help, we should perform our share of many collective solutions to honor our commitments.

Nefsky's challenges are recognized as the most significant obstacles to non-instrumentalist approaches. Recall that she introduces the superfluity and disconnect problems. The superfluity problem questions whether the offered moral reasons apply when one's action is superfluous. Why is "donating one's pint to help the victims" more beneficent than "keeping one's pint" when neither makes a difference in quenching the men's thirst? The disconnect problem questions whether the offered moral reasons can justify only the actions we want to justify, and, if not, whether they connect to the problem in the right way. Why does "donating one's pint to help the victims" show more concern for the ends of others than "applauding from the sidelines" when both are instrumentally insignificant?

Let us begin with the disconnect problem. Because CIPs, by their nature, can only be combated through a collective solution, I have argued that one must commit to this collective solution and honor one's commitment by performing one's share. This line of reasoning cannot justify disconnected actions. Applauding from the sidelines is not a part of the collective solution, so it cannot be used to honor one's commitment to combating the problem.

How about the superfluity problem? Neither donating one's pint nor throwing it on the floor affects the outcome. But this is not the relevant criterion. The argument suggests that one *must* adopt others' ends, which

entails committing to combat their problems, binding oneself to the collective solution, and doing one's part. Doing one's part is simply the only appropriate way to honor one's commitments to others' well-being. Note that doing one's part is indispensable in one's adoption of the end of beneficence, *not* in combating the problem at hand.[17] My claim is that donating one's pint honors one's commitment to combating the men's thirst, *not* that it quenches the men's thirst.

This response to the superfluity problem may be quite divisive. To some, it may seem absurd. How does a superfluous action honor one's commitments to the ends of others? I acknowledge that this may seem strange and would not fit into some normative frameworks, but there is a deeper Kantian rationale that makes it a natural position *for Kantians*.

Kantians do not evaluate the outcomes of actions but the form of the will. Kant holds that "the fulfillment of duty consists in the form of the earnest will, not in the intermediate causes of success" (CPJ: 5:451). He famously says that even if the good will achieves nothing, "then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself" (G: 4:394). A will can be unconditionally good only if it is good by virtue of itself, by how and what it *wills*, rather than what it accomplishes. For this reason, Kantians evaluate the maxim as the principle upon which one acts, describing the "how" and "why" of acting. Even if my action has no effect, my will can be good as long as it is formed in the right way.

Evaluating the maxim expressing one's intention, rather than what an action brings about, makes it possible to honor a commitment through a superfluous action. Donating my pint with the intention to attend to the victims' well-being honors my commitment to the ends of others, and so my will is formed in the right way. If I fail to donate my pint, I do not honor my commitment to combating the problem, which would qualify as indifference. This is a violation of the end of beneficence. Like a lie that remains unnoticed nonetheless signifies contempt for someone's autonomy, an undonated (though insignificant) pint signifies indifference to other people's ends.

One may object that the need to do one's part follows only *conditionally* from binding oneself to the collective solution. I will restrict my account to open cases here, that is, cases where the collective solution can still be achieved (Nefsky 2023).[18] In such cases, we may not know whether others will donate their pint. Does my duty hinge on their actions? For Kantians, it does not. Note that we do not have a duty to make the collective solution happen. We only govern our own actions, which, in this case, is my share of the collective solution. It might be important for our "psychological resolve" to *believe* that others will do their fair share. Chignell (2023) offers a Kantian justification for such a belief. But for my normative requirements, the cooperation of others is irrelevant.

Norms in Kantian ethics are always unconditional. This implies that duties cannot be conditional upon other people's good actions. Even in a

world full of evil, we must govern our own actions with the right principles. Kantians even hold that one must fulfill one's duty when the effects are adverse. So, you have a duty to tell the truth even if doing so has *only adverse effects*.[19] From this point of view, it is not strange to have a duty to take actions that have *no relevant effects*. This position also entails that if faced with the choice to perform an instrumentally significant action that would be morally virtuous but not required (e.g., donating to a victim of climate disasters) and an instrumentally insignificant action that is minimally required (e.g., reducing one's emissions), one ought to perform the latter.

Kantians believe we should act as *ideal agents*. We are urged to think of ourselves as members of a "kingdom of ends," where we imagine ourselves to be legislating universally (G: 4:438). The thought behind this principle is that ethics should prescribe universal principles that hold for all and do not depend on subjective conditions. Imagining myself as a member of the kingdom of ends, I imagine legislating that everyone does their part of the collective solution, and so *I* ought to act as if everyone *would* comply with the collective solution. Therefore, I should perform my part in the collective solution to combat CIPs.

5 Conclusion

Why should I take action in CIPs where the well-being of others is seriously at risk, even though my action will not make a difference? I have argued on Kantian grounds that agents have the unconditional duty to adopt the end of beneficence, that is, to support the practical rational activity of other agents and help them achieve their true needs. Maxims displaying non-beneficence, undermining the rational functioning of other agents, and indifference, a failure to respond to crucial needs of others, are incompatible with the end of beneficence. Failing to commit to combating collective harm cases, such as global warming, amounts to non-beneficence. Failing to commit to combating collective rescue problems, such as *Drops of Water*, amounts to indifference. Committing to combating CIPs entails a commitment to the collective solution. To honor one's commitment, one ought to do one's share of the solution. Even if one's actions are instrumentally insignificant, one ought to act as an ideal agent and honor one's commitments to properly recognize and adopt the ends of others.

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Notes

1 These actions do make a difference in some ways, but not to the morally relevant problem (e.g., an open seat on an airplane will not alter the harm people experience from global warming).
2 Despite using some Kantian language, the most influential fair shares account in climate ethics relies on an instrumentalist solution (Baatz and Voget-Kleschin 2019: 577).
3 All references to the works of Immanuel Kant use the volume and page numbers of the Academy Edition. Abbreviations: CPJ: *Critique of the Power of Judgment;* G: *Groundwork for The Metaphysics of Morals;* MM: *The Metaphysics of Morals*; SRL: *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy* (Kant 1996; 2000).
4 The argument presupposes that there is no existing institutional scheme to solve the problem.
5 Latitudinists claim that we can prioritize our personal ends "as we please" (Hill 2002), whereas some rigorists claim that we must always prioritize our duties (Timmermann 2018). Even on a rigorist interpretation, one imperfect duty could be limited by another imperfect duty, and no minimal requirements for a specific problem follow.
6 Davidson (2023) argues for the perfect duty to act as if a carbon price limited our actions, but he provides no derivation of this duty from the categorical imperative. The disagreement might be partially semantic, because on both our accounts, agents have a range of options to reduce emissions, with a strict minimal requirement.
7 Svoboda (2012) advances an argument for climate action based on the obligatory end of one's moral perfection.
8 Even if we did not have personal aspirations, we would have other duties for which we sometimes need the help of third parties. This complicates the argument, though, because it first requires one to accept other moral duties.
9 I want to emphasize that Kantians are interested in evaluating an agent's maxims since that is where moral worth lies. An agent might act "green" out of selfish motives, which can be in accordance with duty, but their actions would lack moral worth.
10 In this volume, Nefsky and Tenenbaum (2026) argue that the lack of the potential to make a difference to the outcome separates CIPs from cases like the child in the pond. By breaking this analogy, we could explain why it is not wrong not to always help in CIPs. In contrast, I argue that it is not wrong not to always help because our obligation is limited to doing our share of the relevant solution to the CIP we must be committed to.
11 On these grounds, Ananiev (2026) rejects Albertzart's original universalization test that makes use of "intentions-that" to bridge the end of beneficence and the taking of actions.
12 Typical fairness approaches appeal to "the presence of a collective obligation to bring about some outcome" and argue that you should do your share of this collective obligation (Nefsky 2015: 254; Cullity 2000). These approaches propose that you should do your fair share so as not to be unfair to *others* who

do theirs. In contrast, I believe one must do one's fair share to be sufficiently committed to helping the victims.

13 Note that for now, I will simply assume the collective solution to be egalitarian, but this is not uncontested. See Smits (2026) for more discussion in the context of global warming.

14 It is less evident what it might mean to do one's fair share of the solution when the solution cannot be clearly divided among a group of agents or when only a subset of all relevant agents has to act to reach the goal. These are important follow-up questions that I have to set aside for now.

15 Imperfect duties can be limited by other duties. So, if a minimal requirement of some imperfect duty is incompatible with another minimal requirement of an imperfect duty or with a perfect duty, there may be morally acceptable reasons not to do one's part.

16 A requirement to work toward a political solution is in itself not a way out of the inefficacy problem. Our actions aimed at realizing a collective scheme do not make a difference either (Baatz and Voget-Kleschin 2019: 574).

17 This distinguishes the account from expressivist solutions, which think of the agent's action as a statement to the victim (Wieland 2026a: section 5). Williams (2019) argues on Kantian grounds that we should try to rid ourselves of the complicity in systems of harmful interaction, even if our actions count as mere "'words' and fragmentary gestures" (466).

18 Kantians could hold that the commitment to the ends of others requires one to perform one's share, even if we *know* that the collective solution will not happen, but I will not argue for this claim here. Miller (2011) introduced the question of how others' noncompliance affects our reasons to act.

19 This thought seemingly led Kant to the controversial position that we should remain truthful to a murderer at the door looking for our friend (SRL: 8:426). I do not mean to endorse this position.

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