ASYMMETRIC THREATS
AND
ETHICAL MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

Many movements are built on the proposal that individuals ought to change their behavior in order to achieve certain goals. Whether it is saving human lives, other species, or the environment, individuals are told that their personal decisions can make a moral difference. However, I contend that we ought to abandon such ethical movements to the extent that their focus on individual action upholds systemic threats while we nonetheless accept the movements' claims of what individuals ought to do. I do so by drawing a distinction between immediate threats and systemic threats and arguing that movements that uphold systemic threats can be rightly criticized for that failure, even if they include correct assessments about what individuals ought to do. I conclude that these movements ought to be replaced with movements that aim to remove not only immediate, individual threats but also overarching, systemic threats to innocent lives and the environment.

Keywords

Resumen

Muchos movimientos se basan en la propuesta de que los individuos deben cambiar su comportamiento para alcanzar determinados objetivos. Ya se trate de salvar vidas humanas, otras especies o el medio ambiente, se dice a los individuos que sus decisiones personales pueden marcar una diferencia moral. Sin embargo, sostengo que deberíamos abandonar estos movimientos éticos en la medida en que su enfoque en la acción individual sostiene amenazas sistémicas mientras que, no obstante, aceptamos las afirmaciones de los movimientos sobre lo que los individuos deberían hacer. Lo hago estableciendo una distinción entre amenazas inmediatas y amenazas sistémicas, y argumentando que los movimientos que defienden las amenazas sistémicas pueden ser criticados con razón por ese fallo, incluso si incluyen valoraciones correctas sobre lo que los individuos deberían hacer. Llego a la conclusión de que estos movimientos deberían ser sustituidos por otros que tengan como objetivo eliminar no sólo las amenazas inmediatas e individuales, sino también las amenazas globales y sistémicas a las vidas inocentes y al medio ambiente.

Palabras clave

Ética medioambiental; altruismo efectivo; ética aplicada; amenazas sistémicas

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Introduction

According to climate scientists, a human-caused climate catastrophe looms over our future. One of the major culprits is our carbon emissions. Recognizing this, many environmental movements call on individuals to take actions

aimed at reducing their carbon footprints. In fact, there are many ethical movements built on the proposal that individuals ought to change their behavior in order to achieve certain goals. Whether it is saving human lives, other species, or the environment, individuals are told that their personal decisions can make a moral difference. These proposals are not without their critics. For example, proponents of effective altruism have been charged with taking the state of the world as-it-is and focusing excessively on individual choices that fail to affect the larger systems and structures at work that create inequality.[1] Similar charges arise in environmental ethics debates, as seen, for example, in greenwashing critiques.[2] Movements that focus on individual choices are criticized for ignoring the way in which this overly narrow focus can reinforce the status quo and the powerful parties that benefit from it. One response is to embrace this charge. Perhaps we should be focused, at least in part, on what the right thing to do is here and now, with conditions on the ground as-they-are.[3] After all, if the question at hand is 'What should I do?,' then it's reasonable to focus on an individual's action at this time. Yet, if an entire movement ultimately protects and promotes the very systems and structures that threaten lives or destroy environments, then it may be right for individuals to abandon the movements, even if they don't abandon the individual decisions that the movements call for.

In order to make sense of this proposal to abandon movements without rejecting the movements' claims of what individuals ought to do, I begin by exploring the original thought experiments of the Singerian effective altruism

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[1] See, for example, Nussbaum 1997 and Srinivasan 2016.
[2] See Stoll 2017.
[3] McMahan (2016) embraces such a response in defense of critiques against Unger (1996).

movement. In these thought experiments, distinct cases are presented as morally analogous, but a puzzle arises because the cases don't seem morally analogous to those who are asked to consider them. I show that, despite the claims of effective altruists, the cases in question are not in fact morally analogous. There is a morally relevant difference arising from an asymmetry of the threats involved, and this critique can be extended to other ethical movements, such as those in environmental ethics debates. To see why this is so, let us look to the roots of effective altruism movements.

Effective altruists have offered highly influential arguments that have led to real-world movements.[4] Their arguments lead to calls for individual action. They claim that individuals are ethically required to donate excess resources—such as money they would have spent on luxuries or non-necessities—and even to choose professions that will enable them to donate maximally over the course of a lifetime.[5] At the same time, these arguments show that failing to donate threatens lives. Debates in environmental ethics have similar features. They lead to calls for individual actions. Individuals are arguably ethically required to recycle their waste, purchase electric vehicles, ride their bicycles, reduce air travel, avoid red meat, and the like. And these arguments conclude that failing to choose such actions threatens the environment. Such is the basis for many environmental movements.[6]

It has not gone unnoticed that this focus on individual action may be unduly myopic. At best, it is an incomplete

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[4]   See, for example, www.effectivealtruism.org and www.thelifeyoucansave.org.

[5] See MacAskill 2015.

[6]   See, for example, www.connect4climate.org , www.mondaycampaigns.org/meatless-monday, and fridaysforfuture.org.

approach to solving problems such as unequal resource distribution, environmental degradation, or climate disaster. At worst, it is an intentional effort by those who benefit from the status quo to distract from the deeply unethical systems in place and to allow them to continue with business-as-usual. My aim in this paper is to show that, regardless of the intentions of those behind these movements, such distractions arise when they conflate systemic threats with more immediate, individual threats. This conflation is baked-in to the original arguments for effective altruism, so I will begin my analysis there.

The original argument from analogy

Arguments from analogy populate the call for effective altruism. The cases presented all share some common, morally relevant features. Innocent lives are threatened. Individual agents can save those lives. But saving those lives requires that the agents must sacrifice something of monetary value. I will focus on a Singer-style shallow pond case as my baseline case for the purposes of this paper.[7] Consider the following:

> *Shallow Pond*: A child has wandered into a shallow pond and is drowning. You are walking by after purchasing and donning a pair of expensive shoes. You see that the child is drowning and that you are in a position to wade into the pond and save this child's life. However, you also recognize that wading into the pond will ruin your shoes. You continue on your way, and the child dies.

Virtually everyone has the intuition that you have made the morally wrong decision in this case. It is obvious that you

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[7] Singer 1972.

should wade into the pond and save the child, even though it will ruin your shoes. So, morality requires that we sometimes sacrifice what we possess and value in order to save lives, which leads to the following purportedly morally analogous case.

> *Starving Child:* You are invited to donate money that will save at least one child from starvation in a famine-stricken part of the world. You decline to donate, and later you purchase a pair of expensive shoes with money that you could have donated. The child whose life you could have saved dies.

Most people have a different reaction to this kind of case. Buying things for yourself and failing to donate that money to charity is commonplace. Few people are horrified to discover that you purchased a new, unnecessary item with money you could have donated. Intuitively, it is far worse to walk away from a drowning child than it is to spend extra money on something you value.

Singer, Unger, and their followers argue, however, that such intuitions in the *Starving Child* case are misguided.[8] They claim that these cases are morally on par, and that failing to donate to charity in order to effectively save lives is equally as bad as walking away from the drowning child. I agree that most candidate differences don't hold up to close moral scrutiny. If there are no morally relevant differences at all, then, insofar as you agree that walking away from the child in Shallow Pond in a monstrous act, you should, on pain of consistency, find it equally monstrous to fail to donate extra money to effective charities.

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[8] Singer 1972; Unger 1996

Immediate versus systemic threats

But there is in fact a morally relevant difference between the two cases, and it arises from an analysis of the threats at play. One case involves an immediate threat to innocent life, whereas the other involves both immediate and systemic threats. To see this difference, we must consider a slightly bigger picture. We must look at the *reasons why* the agent is faced with the choices in question. In the *Shallow Pond* case, the reason why you must choose between an innocent life and your shoes is that the child was hapless. Your inaction is a direct threat to that child's life, and only you are to blame if that child dies. The threat to the child's life disappears the moment you save their life. But consider another case.

> *Developers*: Developers have built a shallow retention pond near a children's school knowing that this will greatly increase the likelihood that children could drown in it. However, it would be expensive to build the pond anywhere else, and their concern for the bottom line has led the developers to prioritize financial benefit over risks to children's lives. A child walking home from school wanders into the pond and drowns.

The developers' choices created a threat to innocent children's lives, and, intuitively, the developers are partly to blame here. Their business practices predictably and impermissibly led to the death of an innocent child. Now consider a slightly modified case.

> *Developers Plus*: Developers have built a shallow retention pond near a children's school knowing that this will greatly increase the likelihood that children might drown in it. However, it would be expensive to build the pond anywhere else, and their concern for the

bottom line has led the developers to prioritize financial benefit over risks to children's lives. You are walking by after purchasing and donning a pair of expensive shoes. You see the child is drowning and that you are in a position to wade into the pond and save this child's life. However, you also recognize that wading into the pond will ruin your shoes. You continue on your way, and the child dies.

Your inaction threatened this child's life, and you are clearly to blame for the child's death. But so are the developers who built the pond in the first place and created the overarching threat that existed before you arrived. And this case is more appropriately analogous to the *Starving Child* case than the original *Shallow Pond* case. The metaphorical child in the *Starving Child* case is not merely hapless. That child represents real children in the real world who are starving or whose lives are otherwise threatened by preventable, poverty-related circumstances. Put simply, there is a reason why the child's life is at risk in the first place. Famine does not arise in a vacuum, and neither does affluence. Historical, political, and economic analyses demonstrate that other rich and powerful agents have enacted systems that predictably threaten innocent lives, leaving the less powerful to grapple with decisions about life, death, luxury, and sacrifice that are actually avoidable.[9] And so we don't want merely to ask whether an individual should save the child's life. We must ask whose actions created a threat to innocent lives in the first place.

By modifying the features so that they are more fully morally analogous, we may discover two distinct moral issues that are easily conflated because of the benign nature

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[9] Pogge 2010.

of the original *Shallow Pond* case.[10] The two moral questions at stake are 'What should *you* do?' and 'What *should be done*?' The answers to these questions are coextensive in the *Shallow Pond* case because your inaction was the *only* relevant threat to innocent life. You should have saved the child's life, and that is all that should be done. However, these answers *diverge* in the *Developers Plus* case because both you and the developers present distinct threats. The threat of your inaction is an *immediate* threat to this child's life, whereas the developers' choices generate a more *systemic* or overarching threat. This difference between immediate and systemic threats makes a moral difference because it informs questions of blameworthiness, persistence, and prescriptive claims about how to prevent the loss of innocent life.

The individual is to blame if their inaction leads to innocent deaths, but so too are those who create and sustain the systemic threats that result in innocent lives lost. Importantly, it should be noted that, in such cases, individual actions do little or nothing to remove the systemic threats, even if they remove the immediate threat. Thus, systemic threats are persistent and largely unaffected by the individual action in question. Ultimately, the more robust conclusion one should draw from such thought-experiments is that there is excellent moral reason to remove both immediate and systemic threats. And to the extent that the individual is both not responsible for the systemic threat and

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[10] To make the original case less benign, one could also modify the Shallow Pond scenario by stipulating that the shallow pond is part of a housing development, and the person walking by also resides nearby. They voted to have the pond installed, and their HOA payments helped to fund it. This, then, makes the Shallow Pond case more analogous to the Starving Child case insofar as the shoes and the agent's ability to afford those shoes are products of systemic exploitation. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

unable to remove the systemic threat with their individual action, there are moral imperatives that fall outside the scope of the individual agent's action. But insofar as various ethical movements preserve systemic threats by directing collective focus onto immediate threats, these movements are morally flawed.

So, what should you do in the *Developers Plus* case? You should save the child's life at the cost of your shoes, of course. But what should be done to prevent the loss of innocent life? Those who created the pond and the larger threat itself should take on the costlier option and remove the overarching threat that they ought not to have created. Likewise, those who create or sustain conditions of poverty and famine in the *Starving Child* case (and in the real world) should end the systemic and structural oppression and exploitation that create life-threatening conditions, even if this costs them financially. Insofar as they fail to do this, they too are morally responsible for the loss of innocent life. Likewise, those who create and sustain conditions that threaten, say, climate disaster, should be held responsible for that systemic threat, even though there is also reason to take individual actions that avoid, say, individual carbon consumption. So, while not perfectly analogous, a similar lesson arises in environmental cases. Individuals can and should make certain personal decisions that would allow them to avoid contributing to pollution, environmental degradation, climate disaster, and the like. But environmental movements that ignore or minimize the systemic threats ensure that such threats are preserved, even as the individuals address the more immediate threats. While actions such as recycling, avoiding air travel, or purchasing electric vehicles often do not by themselves remove immediate threats in the same way that donating to an effective charity can, they are nonetheless constitutive of

what an individual *can* do to *mitigate* immediate threats and to help save lives and the environment. Though these environmental cases may require more focus on collective action than typical effective altruism cases, such environmental movements nonetheless call for a collection of ground-up *individual* actions rather than direct structural change coming from the top down. In the same way, then, these issues focus the solution on the ways in which individuals can and should act *given* the conditions on the ground, instead of focusing on the ways in which conditions on the ground could and should be changed.

Challenging the purported analogy

Notably, if you do what you should do in *Starving Child* case, then the cycle of moral dilemmas for everyday agents perpetuates. This is in contrast to the *Shallow Pond* case wherein the conditions that threaten the child's life disappear the moment you pull the child out of the pond. In the real world, there are myriad and seemingly endless opportunities to save innocent lives by donating our excess resources.[11] The threat does not disappear the moment you save a life as it does in the *Shallow Pond* case. This difference has not gone unnoticed even by Singer, but Singer focuses on the implications it carries for the question of how much *more* the individual should be asked to give.[12] He does not

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[11] Travis Timmerman (2015) notes this perpetuation of threats and uses it to challenge Singer's analogy in a different way, though he does not acknowledge the distinction between immediate and systemic threats and instead focuses primarily on justifications for individual inaction in the face of perpetuating immediate threats.

[12] See Singer 1999. Nussbaum (1997) and others have also highlighted this issue and the related worry of the overdemandingness of utilitarianism, however, that particular issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

acknowledge that this concern exposes asymmetric systemic threats to innocent lives that create a cycle of moral dilemmas for the agent that do not arise in the original *Shallow Pond* case.

We see the same cycle of moral dilemmas arise in environmental cases. If the economic systems and political structures that uphold massive environmental degradation, carbon consumption, and the like are not changed, it's hard to see how any realistic amount of morally correct individual choices could remove the threat of climate disaster. My challenge highlights the fact that an individual saving an impoverished child's life or reducing their carbon footprint does not remedy the systemic conditions that threaten children's lives or the environment. This does not mean that the individual agent is not to blame if they allow the immediate threat of starvation or poverty-related illness to take a child's life, or if they ignore the ways in which their unnecessary actions contribute to climate disaster. But the individual is often not to blame for the systemic threats that continue unabated even as individuals do more and more to make a moral difference where they can. If there were no systemic threat, then, in the *Developers Plus* case, both the children and your shoes would be safe. Removing the systemic threat eliminates both the risk of harm and the moral dilemma the individual agent would have faced.

In sum, there is a morally relevant difference between the *Shallow Pond* case and the *Starving Child* case. The *Shallow Pond* case presents only an immediate threat, whereas the *Starving Child* case presents both an immediate threat and a systemic threat and therefore brings more to the table in terms of moral considerations. With no systemic threat in the *Shallow Pond* case, you are the only one to blame if the child dies. In the *Starving Child* case, the greater threat to children's lives is systemic, and you are not to blame

for this overarching threat to innocent lives. This may therefore qualify as a "Preservationist" solution to the dilemma Singer and Unger highlight.[13] Preservationist solutions preserve our divergent intuitions about the two original cases and allow that these intuitions track relevant moral values. I have uncovered a morally relevant difference that justifies our competing intuitions and preserves them to a certain extent. It explains why we have stronger moral reactions to moral failings in cases where the threat is immediate and arises from misfortune than we do to the moral failings in cases where the threat is both immediate and systemic, and where the systemic threat arises from the avarice of powerful others who are also to blame for innocents dying—a threat which does not disappear after the action of the individual. I do not deny that both cases involve moral failings. But our assessment of personal moral failing is intuitively, and, I argue, justifiably, stronger when unjust systems are not also part of the equation—unjust systems upheld by those who are unconscionably perpetuating systemic threats and preserving their power to do so.

Individual complicity in systemic threats

One objection to this analysis arises from my distinction between immediate threats and systemic threats. I have argued that rich and powerful others force common people in industrialized countries into the kind of moral dilemma we see in the *Starving Child* case, and this explains divergent intuitions regarding wrongdoing. However, this implies that common people in developed parts of the world are not to blame for the conditions faced by those in poverty-stricken parts of the world. Yet, insofar as industrialized peoples' choices and our consumerism indirectly contribute

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[13] This Preservationist option was outlined by Unger 1996: pp. 10-11.

to the harm and death of innocents, they may bear some portion of blame for the fact that an innocent life is threatened. Suppose I purchase items made with palm oil. Suppose this not only financially supports the environmental degradation and climate risk of monoculture businesses but also leads to the death of innocent children who were forced into extremely dangerous labor for the palm oil industry. In these ways, members of industrialized countries as individuals contribute to both immediate threats and systemic threats, and the justification for preserving our original intuitions is at risk of dissolving. One quick response is to note that we are probably not recognizing our own complicity when encountering *Starving Child*-style cases, and so this feature likely had little effect on our original intuitions. But more importantly, this facet highlights precisely the problem I wish to demonstrate, and it highlights that this problem is not restricted to famine relief cases.

Reliably, the reason that wealthy and powerful others directly or indirectly threaten the lives of those in underdeveloped parts of the world is that it benefits them.[14] Where do those benefits come from? They often come from consumers and citizens in the developed world whose everyday choices support a system that is oppressing and exploiting underprivileged people, their land, and their resources. In this way, the agent in the *Starving Child* case may be part of the reason that a child is starving to death, and therefore may be part of the systemic threat. Increasingly, people are realizing that their everyday choices have ethical and global ramifications. Interestingly, this leads to precisely the moral conundrum we have already seen in this paper. Common people are in a good position to endorse or reject

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[14] Cf. Shiva 1992 and Shue 1999.

various practices and their underlying moral implications with their individual decisions and purchases. Yet, the options available for endorsement and rejection are still dictated primarily by those who wield most of the decision-making power. And these powerful people can and do make immoral choices that carry sweeping effects, even though common people nonetheless contribute to the harms in question in much smaller ways through their individual choices.

Part of the way that this happens is through the control that current systems and structures exercise over what *choices* are made available for individual consumers. For example, there is good reason to think that climate change is anthropogenic and systemic. Members of industrialized countries contribute vastly more to carbon consumption than others in the world. If you are a member of an industrialized country, then you are part of this systemic threat. You are partially to blame insofar as your carbon consumption contributes to this threat. What should you do? As we have seen, the individual choices you can make to cut back on your individual carbon consumption are arguably the right choices. But the extent to which an individual even can cut back is determined by systems and structures outside of their control. If you purchase an electric vehicle in a place where the electricity available comes from coal, then you are guaranteed to be less effective than someone who made the same choice but whose electricity comes from renewable resources. More importantly, this worry does not address the entirety of the moral picture, as many have noted.[15] One's individual choices will not remove

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[15] Walter Sinnot-Armsrtong (2005), for example, argues that the focus on individuals' environmental choices is largely unjustified. No individual caused climate change, and none can fix it. This threat is so large that the moral focus should be on governments, not individuals.

the systemic threat. Drastic, policy-level change needs to occur in order to effectively mitigate threats to the environment or human life and increase the availability of more morally appropriate choices.[16] Most individual people are not in a position to alter the threats to this degree.[17] It must come from those in power, working together.[18]

So, even though your role as a member of a developed country means you are likely not blameless when it comes to contributing to systemic threats, the lion's share of the blame still falls on the shoulders of those whose large-scale decisions create and sustain threatening conditions and also serve to severely limit the everyday choices available to the individual. Importantly, morality is not merely for the common folk. The moral choices faced by those in power are far more pressing—in part because they shape the threats at play and determine which moral choices individuals commonly face. Focusing excessively on the actions of individuals distracts from this fact.

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[16] IPCC 2018.

[17] This is not to say that individuals cannot have significant effects. Structural inequalities are part of most everyday decisions, but, as Iris Marion Young (2011) notes, there are areas where certain individuals may have greater power to change harmful structural processes, and focusing on those specifically will still be morally important for those individuals. But this is a distinct concern from the one outlined in this paper.

[18] Notably, individuals in at least some countries are in a position to alter the actions of those in power insofar as their votes affect the choices and policies of those in power and affect who specifically represents them. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out. Moreover, those individuals who vote for policies or representatives that preserve or promote systemic threats may then be exercising this individual power—insofar as it is effective—in ways that may be legitimately morally criticized. However, if and when governments and representatives fail to provide any meaningful pathways for combating systemic threats, more radical changes may be needed in order to protect innocent lives and the environment.

Shifting the focus of the moral discussion

This connects to a second type of objection. While I preserve the intuitively disparate intensity of our moral reactions to individual decisions in the original two cases, I maintain that it is nonetheless wrong not to save lives in both cases. One may interject here and note that this analysis is not Preservationist *enough*. That is, it does not alter the moral lesson of the *Shallow Pond*-style cases. I maintain that individuals are still obligated to sacrifice resources to save lives in many circumstances.

I reply that my contribution nonetheless alters the moral lesson insofar as the proponents of the original cases posit *no* moral difference between them and then use this conclusion as the basis for entire movements focused excessively on individual actions and immediate threats. This doesn't mean that their conclusions of individual wrongdoing were incorrect. Instead, their presentation of the cases as morally analogous ignores the risks of building movements primarily or only on the basis of immediate threats. These risks include effectively supporting and further entrenching systemic threats. Such analyses narrow the moral focus onto individual behaviors and choices while occluding the systemic threats that persist even when individuals make altruistic, life-saving choices. Excessive focus on individual actions in the face of systemic threats is itself a kind of moral failing, and movements that fail in this way ought to be either abandoned or integrated into movements that effectively aim for systemic change.

Consider the following example. In the early 1950s, litter was piling up in the United States, and state legislators were poised to enact regulations on the amount of

disposable packaging companies were allowed to generate.[19] But producing more sustainable packaging would have been much less profitable than producing disposable packaging. In response, litter-producing companies came together to start the Keep America Beautiful campaign. This campaign successfully shifted the moral focus away from the systemic threats that companies and production policies were entrenching and instead put the spotlight on the more immediate threat of the individual citizen who was villainized for littering. The opportunity to reduce a systemic threat and to require those with wealth and power to make the appropriately altruistic choices was lost. Supporting the Keep America Beautiful movement was the wrong thing to do, even though rejecting the movement doesn't make littering the right thing to do.

Shifting the focus and blame allowed for the unchecked proliferation of harmful conditions and systemic threats by companies with the power to control the discourse and unduly amplify individual choices. And the damaging effects of this lost opportunity have been significant, whereas the beneficial effects of individuals not-littering pale in comparison. By allowing litter-producing companies to control the moral discourse and place the burden of moral responsibility primarily on the individual, the much more significant moral action of creating new systemic threats was ignored. While we should take seriously our obligations to save lives and the environment, we should also recognize ways in which a focus on our individual choices helps to perpetuate the very threats we wish to remove.

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[19] Rogers 2005.

Retaining the moral choice, rejecting the movement

I conclude that individuals have good moral reason to reject many environmental and effective altruism movements to the extent that they uphold systemic threats. This does not mean that such movements have drawn incorrect conclusions about what individuals ought to do in discrete cases. Rather, they are drawing insufficiently narrow conclusions focused only or excessively on what individuals ought to do in discrete cases. As we saw with the example of the Keep America Beautiful campaign, this overly narrow scope can counteract the moral improvements that individuals make by empowering those who create increasingly-damaging systemic threats and enabling greater reliance on the systems that maintain and perpetuate such threats. Whether intentional or not, these movements are effectively complicit in supporting the systemic threats to lives, to the environment, and to our species' future. It is more morally appropriate and arguably more effective to create or endorse movements that refuse to conflate systemic and individual threats. If an ethical movement addresses only what an individual can do to mitigate or remove immediate threats and simultaneously ignores the question of what ought to be done to mitigate or remove systemic threats, it seriously risks reinforcing the very harm it purports to want to avoid. Ethical movements should openly expose and challenge the damaging and unjust systems and structures in which individual decisions are necessarily situated. Those movements that fail to critically expand their moral scope and account for the role of systemic threats ought to be replaced.

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