

16. Moral Offsetting

John is aware that many of the things that he does in everyday life contribute to harmful practices. When he eats factory farmed meat, dairy, and eggs, he participates in an industrial agricultural system that causes a great deal of harm to animals and the environment. When he takes joyrides in his car, he participates in a transportation system that emits dangerous levels of greenhouse gases. When he takes long showers, waters his lawn, or plays a round of golf, he participates in practices that contribute to water shortages in nearby communities. And there are many other examples as well.

John feels conflicted about his participation in these harmful practices. On one hand, he feels badly about causing unnecessary harm through his behavior. He wants to live a happy, healthy life, and he also wants to allow others to do the same. On the other hand, John enjoys many of these activities, and he worries that it would be extremely demanding for him to give them all up. Indeed, given how harmful many industries are, John has a hard time even imagining what it would be like to commit to a life in which he did not cause any unnecessary harm.

John initially decides to resolve this conflict by adopting a practice of moral offsetting. This is the practice of balancing harms that you cause by donating to charities that address those harms. For example, John starts offsetting his consumption of meat, dairy, and eggs by donating to animal charities that advocate for reforms to industrial animal agriculture and adoption of vegan diets. Similarly, John starts offsetting his consumption of energy and water by donating to environmental charities that advocate for conservation of scarce natural resources. John reasons that, if he donates even a small amount of money each month to these charities, then the good that he does through his philanthropy will outweigh the harm that he causes through his own behavior.

However, John still feels uncomfortable. On one hand, he thinks that it would involve a lot of self-sacrifice to cause less harm through his behavior, and he also thinks that he is doing more good than harm overall. On the other hand, he recognizes that moral offsetting does not always seem appropriate. For example, it would not be appropriate for John to bully people at school, and then offset that behavior by donating to charities that address bullying at schools. Instead, John thinks, he has a moral obligation to avoid bullying people at school whether or not he donates to such charities. So if moral offsetting is inappropriate in some cases, then is it really appropriate in other cases? If so, why? And if not, what should John do about all the harm that he contributes to?

Study Questions:

1. If John harms a particular group and then helps that same group, do his good actions “cancel” his bad actions? Why or why not?
2. Is there a morally relevant difference between John offsetting the harms that his consumer behavior contributes to, on one hand, and John offsetting the harms that his personal behavior contributes to, on the other hand?
3. Do we have a moral obligation not to contribute to unnecessarily harmful practices, even if not contributing to them seems demanding? Why or why not?