

Counterexamples and your second paper

Consider the following excerpts from a hypothetical paper:

My thesis is that all participation in MCAP is morally obligatory...

Consider the following counterexample to my thesis: Monty is a single father of a young child. The child needs expensive medical treatment which Monty can pay for as long as he does not pay his taxes. Monty is an accountant and knows how to get away with not paying taxes. Tax paying contributes to a worthwhile goal, but Monty does not make a noticeable difference to the goal's being achieved, and paying his taxes causes tremendous harm to Monty's son. So Monty is in a moral collective action puzzle here. Most people would say that it is permissible for parents to do things that are ordinarily wrong in order to help their children, as long as they don't do more harm to others than they benefit their children. Monty does no harm to anyone by not paying his taxes, and needs to do this to help his child, so it is permissible for him to not pay his taxes. Thus, it is permissible for him to not participate in this moral collective action puzzle.

...

Response 1

I disagree with this objection. Monty is in a moral collective action puzzle. A person in a moral collective action puzzle can participate, but participation is expected to be overall bad. Monty's participation is overall bad, since it will harm his son. But, as I've argued above, participation in other moral collective action puzzles is obligatory, even though it is overall bad. So participation here is obligatory, and it is not permissible for Monty to not pay his taxes.

Response 2

I deny that this is permissible, however. This objection assuming that there is a *prima facie* duty to participate in MCAPs. If there weren't at least a *prima facie* duty to do so, then the objection wouldn't have to appeal to a case in which Monty has some very good reason to not participate to show that it is permissible to not participate. So, to show that the example fails, and that it is not permissible to not participate here, I need to show that people's duties to their children do not override their duties to society. Imagine that this were not true, and further that we lived in a world in which all people always behaved morally. The economy is zero sum – whatever benefit one person gets requires that someone else not get that benefit. Helping one's children always comes at some cost to society, and helping society always comes at a potential cost to one's children. If one's duties to one's children were stronger than one's duties to society, then in a world in which everyone behaved perfectly morally, we would all as a group be worse off – everyone would protect their children more than society, and society as a whole would suffer. But, because society as a whole would suffer, each individual's children would also be worse off than in a society in which all people prioritized society above their children. Morality cannot be such that everyone in a perfect society is worse off than in a less perfect society – this would mean that the most moral world is not the best world. So, morality cannot require us to prioritize our children over society. Thus, Monty's duty to his children cannot override his duty to participate in the MCAP of paying taxes, and so it is not permissible for him to not participate here.

Response 3:

I agree that what Monty does here is permissible. However, tax paying in this case is not a moral collective action puzzle. The reason for this is that the goal of tax paying in this case is the maintenance of this society, and that is not a worthwhile goal. For there to be an MCAP, there must be collective action, and collective action is aimed at a worthwhile goal. Further, there is no way this case can be changed to avoid what I have just said. The fact that tax paying would cause Monty's child to suffer is what makes it the case that tax paying is not a worthwhile goal, and if tax paying didn't force Monty to not help his child, then not paying taxes would not seem permissible. To see why I say this, let's consider a parallel example of "participation."

Imagine that a million babies were drowning in a pond. Frank sets up a group to rescue the babies, but the explicit goal of the group is to only save the white babies, even though if they save the white babies, they could easily save all the babies. This is not collective action, because the goal is not really worthwhile. To make that even clearer, imagine that Joe simultaneously sets up a group to save all the babies. Once Joe's group exists, it should be even clearer that there is no reason whatsoever to participate in Frank's group. Why? Because the goal of Frank's group is not an appropriate one, especially once a better alternative exists. So participation in Frank's group is not participation in collective action. (*Continued on next page*)

(Response 3 continued) In Monty’s case, the society in which he lives does not guarantee health care to children who are not wealthy. This is a necessary feature of the case; if the society did guarantee health care to all, then there would be no problem paying his taxes, and this wouldn’t be a counterexample to my thesis. This is an injustice along the same lines as the injustice in the Frank/Joe case: it privileges those born into wealth over those born into non-wealthy families, which makes no more sense than privileging those born into a certain race, especially when any society can, with relative ease, guarantee health care to all. Further, as in the Frank/Joe case, Monty can participate in an alternate collective action: the action of protesting his society by not paying taxes. The existence of this possibility, as in the Frank/Joe case, shows that paying taxes in this society is not participating in collective action aimed at a worthwhile goal. So, even though it is permissible to not pay taxes here, this doesn’t tell us anything about MCAPs.

Response 4:

I share the feeling that Monty’s behavior is permissible, but we should not trust our reactions to this example. They are based on morally unimportant aspects of the case: Monty’s relationship with his son. To see why, imagine that Monty did not have a child, but was moved by the plight of children in the 3rd world. So he decides that he is not going to pay his taxes, and instead will donate to charities that help these children. If it is morally permissible to not pay taxes to help one’s own children, then it should be permissible to not pay taxes to help other children. After all, children are children, and each has an equal right to life and an equally valuable life. And, in fact, Monty can probably help more than one child in the 3rd world by not paying taxes, which should make it even more morally important to not pay taxes. However, people don’t seem to think that it would be permissible for Monty to not pay taxes in order to help children in the 3rd world. If that’s right, then our intuitions about Monty’s behavior in this alleged counterexample must be based on some irrelevant feature of this case.

Triage and responsibility

Some competing considerations to balance

<i>Conservation triage</i>	<i>Health care triage</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rights of animals to life • Rights of species to exist • Value of species (now / future) • Obligations to fix problems “we” caused 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rights of humans to health / life / equality • Rights of future humans to functioning health care system • Benefits of such a system • Obligations to fix problems “we” started

Do we have a greater duty to fix problems we are responsible for?

Evidence for this:

- Harm principle / group harm principle (from Sinnott-Armstrong)
- Wrongness of killing someone who someone else would kill anyway (overdetermined harm examples)
- Fair share being proportionate to past contributions to problem (e.g. in climate change, and in paying the helper cases)

Concerns:

- Are zookeepers partly responsible for problems caused by humans in general?
- If so, are insurers also responsible for problems caused by government failure?
- Does failure to participate in MCAP give responsibility for failure of goal? How much?
- Should, e.g., poor people in wealthy countries be assigned more responsibility for problems that their country caused?