**Responsibility in the Commons**

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In his 1992 essay “Ethics, Public Policy, and Global Warming,” Dale Jamieson argued that the difficulties of responding to climate change arise at least in part from the complexity of assigning moral responsibility for the harms it will produce. Our paradigm case of responsibility, he wrote, involves an individual agent whose action causes a specific harm to another (local) individual. But "this paradigm collapses," he asserted, "when we try to apply it to global environmental problems" like climate change, which makes it hard for us to think about the moral issues involved. “Conventional morality would have trouble finding anyone to blame" for harms caused by climate change, Jamieson wrote, "for no one intended the bad outcome or brought it about.” The global scale of climate change, combined with the miniscule contribution each individual makes to it by him/herself, present a unique challenge to our ability to discuss “responsibility” for it, he suggested; our ordinary paradigm isn’t up to the task. When a catastrophic event occurs because of climate change, it won't be clear who was responsible: "Instead of a single cause, millions of people will have made tiny, almost imperceptible causal contributions-by driving cars, cutting trees, using electricity, and so on. They will have made these contributions in the course of their daily lives performing apparently 'innocent' acts, without intending to bring about this harm." [[1]](#footnote-1) Jamieson is suggesting that we will need to develop a new way of understanding responsibility for this new sort of phenomenon.

Yet this claim is misleading, I'd like to claim, because the thing he's describing in fact isn't all that unfamiliar. In our social world, in fact, important and powerful phenomena generated by vast numbers of independently acting individuals each of whose responsibility for the phenomena is hard to grasp are actually quite common: consider (for instance) the level of the S&P 500, or the annual growth of GDP, or the rate at which dollars change for euros. Here too enormous numbers of individual actions (in the marketplace) have an aggregate effect that a) are not *controllable* by any individual, b) are not *intended* by any individual, and in fact c) face each individual as a “natural” fact that seems to them not like something they have produced but rather something to which their own behaviors must respond. The difficulty in assigning responsibility for climate change, that is, has the same structure as the difficulty assigning responsibility for the movements of the NASDAQ, or of interest rates, or of prices in general. [[2]](#footnote-2) And surely we have a "paradigm" for that – although admittedly specifying what it is turns out to be more complicated than one might think.

That the problem of widely distributed and therefore anonymous responsibility associated with climate change is connected to the sort of collective action problem often described as the “tragedy of the commons” has often been noted.[[3]](#footnote-3) I’d like to point out today, though, that it is also connected to a set of economic phenomena associated with the operation of market mechanisms in general – connected, one might say, directly to the idea of an “invisible hand.” I want to consider these connections in this paper, asking first what the tragedy of the commons has to do with markets, and second how these two are related to the question of ascribing responsibility for the impending global climate catastrophe .

**I**

Everybody here knows the story of the tragedy of the commons. Two elements are crucial to it. One is that the choice an individual herdsman has (to add or not to add a cow) has essentially no impact on the overall result – because, presumably, the number of herdsmen is so large. The second is that there is apparently no possibility for the herdsmen to enter into a serious binding agreement to limit the size of each herd. (These two elements are related: the more herdsmen there are, and therefore the smaller each one's individual impact, the more difficult it becomes for a binding agreement to be reached or to be effective.) Both elements, of course, are present to a very high degree in the case of global warming, or more precisely with respect to the problem of an individual's carbon footprint. I live 35 miles from my place of work, in an area with no public transportation. Each morning I make an implicit decision about whether to drive to work or not: driving generates a certain amount of carbon dioxide and therefore helps to raise the temperature of the planet. Not driving would presumably cause me to lose my job. I actually think I would be willing to sacrifice my job if that would end global warming – but of course it won’t. The amount of warming would in fact remain the same whether I stop driving to work or not, while quitting my job would produce a significant loss to me both financially and in terms of happiness (I like my job). And note by the way that it’s totalsocial welfare that would decrease, not just my own happiness – there’s no one else who would be made better off by my quitting, since climate change would still occur. We could hypothesize that as a matter of private fact everyone else feels exactly the same way – they are all willing to make significant sacrifices to solve the problem of climate change. Even if this were so, each would be in exactly the same situation that I am: without some sort of public guarantee that others will actually make the sacrifice, their own sacrifice would simply be quixotic, and so there's no reason to think anyone would (or should) make it.

This is why Hardin says the only solution to the tragedy of the commons – beyond a privatization of the sort that is hard to imagine in the climate change case – is "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon."[[4]](#footnote-4) The formulation is somewhat tendentious, but the idea is clear: there needs to be some community-level guarantee that all will make the sacrifice before it makes sense for me to make mine. If that guarantee is in place, the problem is solved; without it, a solution seems impossible. A standard example makes the point: without catalytic converters, automobile exhausts would generate (and did once generate) significant amounts of dangerous and unpleasant pollution into the air. A catalytic converter costs (let's say) $300. We can imagine a situation where every driver is willing to spend $300 to enjoy (relatively) clean air and perhaps to know that her fellow-citizens enjoy it as well. Still, this fact would provide no reason for such a driver to purchase a catalytic converter on her own: simply placing it on one's own car would have essentially no impact on the general level of smog if others do not do the same. The solution is to *require* it: that is, to pass a law (democratically!) saying that all automobiles must have catalytic converters built into them. Note that no-one here is being required to do anything they were not (by hypothesis) willing to do in the first place – all the legal requirement does is to provide the needed guarantee that an individual's act (purchasing the catalytic converter) will in fact be aggregated with the acts of all other drivers, and so will not turn out to be insignificant.

It's the absence of this sort of collective decision that produces cases like the tragedy of the commons. Without a law requiring anti-pollution devices on every car, or – to go back to my decision to drive to work – in the absence of public transportation or other communal policies that could produce a meaningful and general reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases, no *individual* decision can prevent tragic consequences from arising: they will arise even ifa private individual purchases the catalytic converter, and even ifI give up my job. And of course in both cases the individual concerned will himself or herselfbe worse off – which, in the absence of any other change, means the community will be worse off (although only slightly) as well. It is crucial to note that *the problem does not arise from greed or selfishness on the part of individuals*: it's not a matter here of an act that will improve the world but that the selfish car-owner is declining to perform due to her unwillingness to sacrifice for the common good. The acts under consideration in these examples – the employee refusing to drive to work, the car-owner purchasing the catalytic converter without being legally required to do so – *will not enhance the common good*, and in fact will detract from it: nothingwill happen to global warming, no changewill occur in air pollution, but the driver's life will definitely be harmed, by losing her job in the first case and by losing $300 in the second. There's no sense in calling an act a sacrifice if it *worsens* the world, *increases* disutility, and if in fact the world would be clearly better off if it were notperformed. But of course to say this is not to deny the fact that the same act,if performed in concert with all one's fellow-citizens, *would* improve the world, *would* help bring about the common good – and that failing to perform it under *those* circumstances wouldbe selfish.

This paradox, that the very act that would be helpful if engaged in by the community as a whole would actually be harmful if engaged in by a single member (not just to herself but to overall welfare), is precisely the tragedy of the commons. It *is* very appropriately called a tragedy, in the classical sense. The agents are faced with an implacable and unavoidable destiny of which they are themselves the authors: it is their own acts, engaged in for the best of reasons and in the fullest understanding of their consequences, that bring about the effects that destroy them – and that appear to them, in the form of an aggregate that they produce but that they have no way to collectively determine, as Fate. But other name for Fate here, it should be clear, is the market. The tragedy is the central structural fact, it seems to me, of laissez-faire capitalism. The acts of private individuals transacting with each other in the market are constantly generating effects when aggregated that none of the individuals intended – and that remarkably, and sometimes tragically, appear to them as facts they cannot change and to which they must simply adjust their behavior. Sometimes those effects are called "the price of gasoline" or "the salary for an assistant professor" or "the profit margin in the grocery business"; sometimes they're called a recession or a spike in unemployment or a new high for the S&P 500; and sometimes they take the form of pollution or global warming , or the other unintended consequences of economic development. But in each case the structure is the same: an aggregation of private acts each of which takes that aggregation as an external fact of the world despite the fact that it is those acts themselves that produce it. Without any way to act *together* as a co-operative whole the consequences of their actions appear to them like facts of nature to which they must merely adjust themselves – driving to work, adding more cows to their herds, putting smog in the air, in full and tragic knowledge of the harms such actions (when aggregated) cannot help but bring about. An economy based on private individuals engaging in private transactions with each other in a free market, I am suggesting, produces a social world whose contours and institutions were chosen by no-one but were produced by all. This is the dark side of the invisible hand, and it seems to me to be the fundamental source of what are called "environmental problems" in general. Whether it is global warming, air or water pollution, toxic wastes, species extinction, or any of the other problems we talk of when we worry about the environment, in each case the problem arises not fundamentally because of ignorance or of selfishness but because the actions of individuals produce consequences when aggregated that none of the individuals necessarily intend but which, in the absence of any public forum in which those actions could be effectively coordinated, they have no way of preventing.

**II**

A number of recent articles have considered the problem of "inconsequentialism" with respect to climate change, asking something like Jamieson's question about how to assign individual responsibility for it in the face of the infinitesimally small contribution we each make. Several recent articles have suggested that the responsibility for preventing climate change has to be understood as a matter of *collective*, rather than individual, responsibility. Thus Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues that ultimately "governments," not individuals, have a moral obligation to fight global warming[[5]](#footnote-5), while Joachim Sandberg claims that while I might not have an individual moral obligation to reduce my carbon footprint, still "*we* have a *collective* obligation to change *our* ways."[[6]](#footnote-6) To talk of collective (or governmental) obligations, however, is not to deny that individuals have any obligations in these matters at all: it's just that rather than acting privately their obligations are *to get the collective to act in the way it ought to*. Baylor Johnson, in an essay focusing directly on the tragedy of the commons, puts the conclusion this way: "One has an obligation in an impending T[ragedy] of [the] C[ommons], and it is to 'do the right thing' without waiting for others. The 'right thing' is not, however, a fruitless, unilateral reduction in one's use of the commons, but an attempt to promote an effective collective agreement that will coordinate reductions in commons use and therefore avert the aggregate harms."[[7]](#footnote-7) The tragedy arises precisely from the lack of an agreement among the actors, and so preventing the tragedy requires, not quixotically performing actions that in the absence of that agreement will produce no improvement in the overall situation (and may even harm it), but rather *working towards such an agreement*. The obligation, I want to argue now, is to move from the realm of the market, which produces the tragedy, to the realm of *politics*.

In this sense "inconsequentialism" is a misnomer. The problem doesn't arise from the inconsequential character of one's individual actions when aggregated, but rather *from the character of the social structure under which that aggregation takes place.* Those who find the conclusion that individuals have no moral obligation to limit their emissions as individuals absurd, thinking that it lets everyone off the hook for the actions they take that do, in the aggregate, cause all the harms of global warming, misunderstand the relevance of inconsequentialism to this kind of case. They fail to see the difference between the inconsequential character of my decision to cut my emissions *in the absence of a general agreement by all others to do so* and the inconsequential character of a decrease in my emissions *as part of such an agreement*. In the first case nothing happens to improve climate, and so I have made no "contribution" to such an improvement, while in the second case presumably global warming is eased and my acts have indeed contributed to that easing. The problem isn't that the effect of one individual's actions on a social aggregate is inconsequential: that's always true, more or less by definition. The problem is that one's individually "inconsequential" actions to cut emissions can only have a – consequential! – effect, and hence count as morally valuable "contributions," if they are coordinated with the (again individually inconsequential) actions of many others. The problem here is *not* simply a version of the paradox of the heap, where the difficulty has to do with how "inconsequential" changes turn into significant ones, but rather a problem having to do with a social structure where co-ordination with others is difficult or impossible to arrange. My obligation isn't to engage in what are essentially symbolic, "modeling," or virtue-evincing but globally ineffective behaviors, as Johnson says: it's to *change that social structure* to make the kind of real co-ordination possible that will lead to actual protection of the climate.

Jonathan Glover, in a 1975 essay on the general problem of inconsequentialism, introduced a (rather distasteful) thought-experiment that has turned out to be quite influential, and is worth reconsidering in this context. [[8]](#footnote-8) One hundred inhabitants of a village on the verge of starvation are about to eat a meal which for each of them consists of one hundred cooked beans. Suddenly one hundred invaders appear in the village, and each of them steals the beans of one of the villagers; the consequence is the death by starvation of everyone in the village. Clearly each invader has done something terribly wrong. But now we are to imagine that – perhaps because of a newfound moral compunction on the part of the invaders, and their being persuaded of the putative inconsequentialist principle that if one's own act causes only an imperceptible harm it cannot be wrong – as they plan their next attack on the next village (which again consists of one hundred starving villagers with one hundred beans each) they decide to change their *modus operandi*. Each attacker now takes *one* bean from the bowl of *each* villager, thus again ending up with one hundred beans but now having personally done no significant harm to any individual. (We assume here that the loss of a single bean from a bowl of one hundred causes no noticeable harm.) Those who defend the claim that inconsequential acts cannot be blameworthy seem forced to conclude that in this second case, unlike the first one, no attacker deserves any blame. But of course the overall effect is exactly the same: each attacker gets one hundred beans, and all the villagers are left to starve.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The moral seems clear: just because the consequences of one's individual action are miniscule, still if when combined with the actions of others they cause harm, one is still individually at fault. The change in procedure between the first and second case is morally irrelevant; if they do wrong in the first case they do wrong in the second one as well. But then this would seem to apply as well to the case of the herdsman adding a cow or the commuter driving to work. It is true that their actions play an individually inconsequential role in commons depletion or global warming, but nonetheless they appropriately bear moral blame for it. It makes no more sense for them to conclude from the small impact of their acts that they can avoid such blame than it would for the bean-stealers to think their shift in tactics could get them off the moral hook. And yet there are certain differences between the bean-stealing story and these others that are worth noting, involving the degree of premeditation and co-ordination involved in the collective act, and those differences, I would suggest, indicate that an important role is played not just by the sorites-like problem of how individual acts contribute to a social aggregate but by the *political* problem of how that aggregate (and the society in which it arises) is actually organized.

For we can imagine a variant on Glover's story of the invaders, an unlikely one to be sure but one that shows the role of co-ordination and organization in eliciting the moral intuition here. For if a single visitor, perhaps starving himself, were to enter the town alone and surreptitiously remove a single bean from each of the bowls without being noticed – again, assuming that the loss of a single bean produces no significant harm– we might well be inclined to say that nothing terribly wrong has been done and that the starving visitor deserves no, or not much, moral condemnation. And then if we imagine one hundred such visitors, each one unaware of each other's existence (and somehow each able to steal a bean from a bowl without noticing that others are simultaneously doing so as well), we end up imagining a situation where we would surely bemoan the loss by all the villagers of all their beans but still would not be so ready to blame the visitors, ignorant as they are that the effect of all their actions together is starvation in the village.[[10]](#footnote-10) The point here is that the moral blame that accrues to the culprits in Glover's story derives in significant measure from the coordinated and premeditated way they go about their business – from the fact that they *collectively* *plan* and *intend* the effects they produce, and that they *consciously* *co-operate* in producing them (and therefore also know that their acts will be aggregated). In the absence of that degree of social organization, I'd argue, we do not see the individual actors as morally responsible for their aggregated act in the same way.

One might be inclined then to conclude that the more organized the actors are, or perhaps simply the more one is awareof the intended actions of one's fellow-actors, the more culpable one will be for the aggregated results of the acts one engages in along with them. Yet the situation is more complicated even than that, I think. To find an analogy to the sorts of everyday experiences of life under a market economy I have been discussing – the experiences of the commuter who regrets his carbon footprint but sees no point in quitting his job to reduce it – one has to imagine yet a third variant of Glover's story, harder still perhaps to imagine but more relevant to those experiences. For let us at this point imagine the hundred hungry visitors each intending to take one bean from each villager but now on the one hand no longer ignorant of the existence of the others, instead fully aware of what the other ninety-nine intend, but on the other hand (for some reason) *unable to talk with them or prevent them from carrying out their intention*. Hungry and isolated, let's imagine, I need the hundred beans to keep from dying and know both that I can remove one bean from each bowl without causing any harm to the villager whose bowl it is, but also that there are ninety-nine others like me in the same situation and with the same intention, and that nothing I can do can change their behavior. Here of course the situation closely resembles the tragedy of the commons. My own act, which is needed to preserve my very life, is by hypothesis in itself inconsequential, but in the context of the other acts I know are going to occur (and am powerless to prevent) the consequence is going to be the starvation of the villagers. But that consequence will arise whether I act or not– and so I'm sorely tempted to do my deed and, perhaps with dirty hands, make my escape.

If I do, am I morally blameworthy? Perhaps I am. But if I am, it won't be because I'm greedy or ignorant or selfish: it will simply be because of the tragic situation I’m in, whereby the act I need to perform – essentially blameless in itself -- will, when aggregated with the acts of others I cannot modify or prevent, cause harm as a consequence. It will be, that is, because I am faced with something like the tragedy of the commons. The problem arises from the way our acts are organized, or rather are not organized. And this kind of non-organization is precisely the sort that arises in a social system where market mechanisms prevail. In the privacy of the market one is unable to affect the actions of others, and must simply accept those actions for what they are – despite the fact that what they are is in fact a response to the aggregated actions of all market participants together. The tragic situation they are in is their own doing; but it is a doing that is itself the aggregated result of their own responses to that very tragic situation.

**III**

The tragedy of the commons arises when a collective "organized" only as a set of private individuals is unable to turn itself into a true collective that decides *together* how to act. What's lacking is a forum in which the various actors can come together and organize themselves into a self-conscious community.[[11]](#footnote-11) But the key characteristic of a forum is that in it people *speak*: a forum is a locus in which decisions are made by interlocutors who *talk* with each other in order to decide what they should together do. I want to argue here that key to understanding the tragedy of the commons is the role in it of *language*, of *speaking*. Left to their own individual devices – left to the market – individuals facing the tragedy of the commons can only as it were *signal* to each other regarding their activities by engaging in various individual transactions. They cannot *speak with* each other about what they should *jointly* do. The point here is perhaps clearer if we consider the other and even more famous version of this kind of collective action problem – the "prisoners' dilemma." Again, everyone knows the story. The two innocent prisoners, each informed of the private advantage to be gained by falsely confessing but aware as well of the even greater, and mutual, advantage of both refusing to confess, are forced by the logic of their situation into an outcome they each realize is worse for both. This is a two-person version of the commons problem. Note that it lacks the element of inconsequentialism, as each prisoner's choice will certainly affect the outcome significantly. But it maintains the element that because the actors' decisions are made independently of each other a result is achieved that neither one prefers and that if they could only act in concert they could both avoid. The metaphor of the prison illuminates the source of the tragedy, which lies precisely in their isolationand (especially) their silence. Cut off from communication with each other, unable to discuss together their situation and how to resolve it, they are effectively left mute, and thismuteness is what leaves them doomed to produce the result they do not want while fully aware that that's what they are doing.

For if they could speak, they could form an agreement that neither one will confess to something she didn't do. Speaking is essentially *dialogue*. The real moral of their story is that the isolated prisoners have no access to dialogue and so are left to make their decisions monologically, and that this is the source of their dilemma. Dialogue, the story shows, is preferable to monologue, notfor the standard Millian reasons about being open to other opinions and therefore being more likely to hit on the truth, but rather (or in addition) because dialogue actually transformsthe social and political situation and thereby makes certain solutions possible whose value individuals are capable of monologically recognizingbut which they cannot by themselves put into practice. Once they speak, the relationship between the prisoners itself furthermore takes on a different moral status, because to speak – to assert, to question, to persuade, to agree, and finally to promise – is to undertake a responsibility towards one's interlocutor, especially to speak the truth and to keep one's word.[[12]](#footnote-12) As solitary prisoners (and maybe strangers) they arguably have no responsibilities to each other. The two of them do not form a collective or community in any serious sense – each is a private individual, alone in a cell, unable to enter into conversation with anyone about what is right to do and therefore left with no alternative but to act for her own benefit alone; and the result, as in the commons case, is – tragically because foreseeably – disaster. In the commons case, too, it is precisely the failure of the herdsmen to *form an agreement* that leads to the tragedy. If instead of acting independently to add cows they were to *talk together* about how they should collectivelyuse the commons, the problem would disappear – they could determine collectively how many cows the commons could support and then decide on a fair division of that number among the herdsmen in the group. But to talk together, to decide together, is *to form a self-conscious community*, where previously none existed. The solution to the various collective action problems here consists, that is, exactly in the act whereby the collective *makes itself into a real collective*, instead of remaining an unorganized group of individuals.

I take it this is the real significance of the conclusion that Johnson and Sandberg each come to – that our moral obligation as members of a community whose aggregated actions are producing significant harms to global climate is not to act as individuals to minimize our own individual emissions, but rather to engage in the sort of political action that would help generate a *collective* decision on the part of the community itself to change the sorts of social practices (and the form of social organization) that leads to those harms. (And arguably something like this is Sinnott-Armstrong's conclusion too, except that he fails to note that, in a democracy, what he calls the "government's" responsibility is really the responsibility of its citizens as a collective.) In doing so we *form* ourselves *into* a real community, deciding *together* what to do instead of each deciding separately and then allowing whatever aggregated social effect might result to turn out however it does.

The key move, as I have already suggested, is a move from the *market* to *politics*. Instead of individual decisions being made by independent participants in the market whose relation to all the other participants is like that between the prisoners in the dilemma, in the political realm decisions are made by members of the collective *together*. I am tempted here to start to use Hegelian language: a collectivity organized only via market mechanisms is what might be called a community in itself but not yet for itself. The collectivity does things, to be sure – the actions of its members produce a certain level of prices, of unemployment, of interest rates, etc., just as they also produce a certain level of carbon emissions and therefore of climate change – but it does not do them consciously and thus its acts take place behind the backs of the actors involved. But in the (democratic) political realm, the community acts *self-consciously as* a community: in that realm it directly *chooses* what it does, as the result of a common decision reached by the members talking together about what would be best for the community as a whole, not for each individual by him or herself. In Hegel's terms, the community is now a community *for itself*.

As mentioned, Hardin says that without privatization the tragedy of the commons can only be avoided by what he calls "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon," but the use of the word "coercion" here is misleading. The driver who is happy to spend $300 for a catalytic converter as long as she can be guaranteed that others will do so too is in a certain simplistic sense "coerced" by a law requiring all cars to have them, but in a deeper sense in fact the passage of the law simply provides the condition that makes it possible for her to achieve the goal she wishes to achieve. (Hegel would say in this sense the law offers her freedom, rather than anything like limitation or coercion.) And the "coercion" involved might take other, non-coercive, forms as well: it's perfectly possible for groups to agree on communal solutions to the problem that employ more informal techniques of enforcement than the passage of laws or other forms of hard coercion.[[13]](#footnote-13) If we imagine a community that democratically decides together that it wishes to engage in a certain form of action – an action that all the individual members agree is the right one – then when they engage in that action together it seems odd to call the decision a case of "coercion." They've all done what they agreed to do, and (assuming a discursive model of democratic decision-making) what they thought was the right thing to do. In what sense have any of them been coerced?

This is the answer to the objection that communal agreement does not resolve the kind of collective action problem exemplified by the tragedy of the commons because it simply replaces it with a new one, the problem of preventing free riding. Even after the herdsmen agree on a new co-operative regime for sharing the commons, and even after the prisoners are allowed to meet to discuss their plans, this objection runs, they *still* face an incentive to secretly increase their herd or to confess, despite the agreement. The fact that "defection" is advantageous to them remains true no matter what they say they will do. "Covenants, without the sword, are but words," Hobbes writes in the canonical expression of this idea, "and of no strength to secure a man at all."[[14]](#footnote-14)  Yet this objection misses the point that the normative situation here is entirely different than it is prior to the formation of an agreement. The isolated prisoners stand in no moral relation to each other: to each one the other is an independent figure whose actions have to be strategically taken into account in the same way as the laws of nature. Once an agreement has been formed, however, they have entered a moral realm whose foundation lies in language-use. They have now made promises to each other, undertaken to perform certain actions, agreed on a common set of co-operative tasks. They don't *predict each other's actions* the way one predicts the behavior of physical objects, but rather they *rely on each other's word*. The relation is no longer strategic but moral. They have formed a community – an "organized collective" – and they are now normatively bound to each other. Hobbes is right, of course, that such normative bonds do not bind us in the way fear of the sword does; when we obey them we do so because we ought to, not because we want to avoid paying the price of punishment. It surely follows that some actors may choose to break the agreement and attempt to free-ride. But such an actor has *now* done something wrong, by violating the normative order that she herself created by her words and her promise. A free-rider in *this* situation deserves all the calumny that virtue theorists and others direct at those who insist that "my emissions make no difference": to break an agreement into which one has voluntarily entered and upon which others are depending, because one hopes to gain the benefits the agreement produces but is unwilling to perform what one has promised, *is* indeed to act selfishly. The moral problem here doesn't have to do with the consequences of one's free-riding (which are doubtless still "inconsequential" in the sense we have been discussing) but rather with the attempt simultaneously to be a member of a discursively constituted community while taking advantage of one's fellow-members by treating them strategically.

Free-riding by breaking an agreement one has already discursively formed is therefore a *political* wrong; it arises at the level of politics and violates the necessary normative presuppositions of that level, and is thus morally quite different from the action of a private individual in the realm of the market. In the market one *must* treat one's fellows strategically, predicting their behavior and attempting to maximize one's utility. There's no other choice, and there is no violation of market norms in acting this way. But as we have seen in a situation where only market transactions and market relationships are to be found, the aggregated total of everyone's actions produces a state of affairs that no one wants and that appears to all like a nature over and against them. Marx called this state of affairs alienation. Politics is where that alienation ends, where the community recognizes itself *as* a community and therefore organizes itself as one as well, and thus by forming a communal agreement about what to do is able to take a kind of control over the aggregation of individual acts that market relations cannot permit. Of course it is possible to treat the political realm like a market realm, acting strategically and employing the techniques of rational choice theory to decide on one's course of action, but to do so is to make a kind of moral category mistake (albeit one that our current social system too often encourages us into).

The problem of the commons, I have been arguing, cannot be solved by market mechanisms – which is to say, by private individuals acting independently of each other. In fact it is *caused* by such mechanisms. It can only be solved by shifting the level of action to the level of politics – the level at which individuals who know themselves to be members of a community decide together, in language, what behaviors they wish to engage in as a community and then carry that decision out as a group, thereby showing themselves to be a self-conscious community and not simply an agglomeration of isolated individuals. Thus it is solved by *democracy*, by which I mean a discursive process in which the members of the community discuss the problems they face and examine various possible solutions, and then decide together which of those solutions will be best. Best for whom? The model of democracy I'm proposing isn't one where each individual attempts to produce the result that will maximize his or her utility: that's simply another way of describing the market relation that leads to the tragedy of the commons. Instead it's a model where each individual expresses and attempts to justify his or her view about what course of communal action would be best overall – what it would be best to do, simpliciter. This procedure will involve individuals expressing their own senses of what are the most important values – which will surely include their own personal good, but will likely include as well the good of their families, of fellow members of the community, but also of other humans outside the community, members of future generations, other sentient creatures, living things, and certainly the "environment" that surrounds them all. And whatever views are expressed, of course, have to be justifiable ones – that is, good reasons have to be given for them, where the goodness of reasons is itself a matter to be judged by the discourse. And the goal of the discourse is agreement – not a *modus vivendi* or compromise, but the actual moment where all involved in the discussion come to a consensus on the practices they wish to engage in and the goals they wish to achieve. In mutually accepting that goal a community commits itself to overcoming the "tragedy of the commons"; if we could only find a way to accept such a goal the unfolding tragedy of climate change might be avoidable as well.

1. Dale Jamieson, "Ethics, Public Policy, Global Warming,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring, 1992), p 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thus when Jamieson writes that **“t**here are three important dimensions along which global environmental problems such as those involved with climate change vary from the paradigm: Apparently innocent acts can have devastating consequences, causes and harms may be diffuse, and causes and harms may be remote in space and time. (Other important dimensions may concern nonlinear causation, threshold effects, and the relative unimportance of political boundaries…),” it’s hard not to think that he could just as easily be talking about the Great Recession. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Stephen M. Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162 (1968), p. 1247. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations," in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Richard B. Howarth, eds.*, Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics* (Burlington: Emerald Group Publishing, 2005), 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Joakim Sandberg, “'*My* Emissions Make No Difference': Climate Change and the Argument from Inconsequentialism," *Environmental Ethics* 33 (2011): 241 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Baylor L. Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons," *Environmental Values* 12 (2003): 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jonathan Glover, “It Makes No Difference Whether I Do It” part I, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, 49 (1975): 174–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Glover, "It Makes No Difference," 174–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. And to make the point even more decisively we could imagine not one hundred but ten thousand hungry visitors, each of whom merely steals a single bean from a single bowl. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Jon Elster, "The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory," in James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 3–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Jürgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)