

# **If we don't others will: an analysis of a common argument**

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# If we don't others will

## 1. Replacement harm

- If we don't manufacture tennis racquets, sunscreens, containing nanoparticles someone else will

## 2. Accumulative harm

- If we stop burning (don't burn) coal others will continue to burn it

## 3. Overdetermination

- Firing squad

## 4. First strike

- If we do X to them they will do X to us

# Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)

- research and innovation which is:
  - ethically acceptable,
  - sustainable by avoiding significant adverse effects, and
  - drives towards the common good, i.e. societal desirability (von Schomberg)
- will be cases where the research/innovation is morally dubious, but
  - **if we don't do someone else will**

- If we stop burning coal others will continue to burn it
- So our stopping will make no difference
- We will harm ourselves for no noticeable benefit to anyone

# Replacement Harm

- Nuclear power example (version 1)
  - If we don't sell uranium other countries will *(we miss out on the profits for no overall gain)*
- Nuclear power example (version 2)
  - If we don't sell uranium other countries with less safeguards will

# Uranium example

- Assumption:
  - Dangers with this energy
    - Safety of nuclear power plants
    - Storage of waste
    - Potential for nuclear weapons
- Australia has much of the world's uranium, but not all
- Question: should Australia sell its uranium for power generation?

# “If we don’ t others will”

## Consequentialist Argument

- The world won’ t be safer if we don’ t sell, because others will
- We will lose export earnings for no good reason
- The world will in fact be safer if we sell because we have tighter safety controls on the use of our uranium
- So we should sell our uranium both for our benefit and for the benefit of the world

# “If we don’ t others will”

## Another Consequentialist Argument

- If we do X it will give a bad example to others (assuming that it would be better if nobody did X)
- If we don’ t do X it will set a good example
- So even on consequentialist grounds the case for doing X is not obvious

# Two Consequentialist Considerations

1. If nothing wrong with X then do X
  - not much force in “If I don’t..” argument
2. If on balance it would be better if nobody did X then simple consequentialist argument not so obvious
  - my example of not doing X must be taken into account

# 1. Nothing wrong with X

- Doing X is not morally wrong
- If we don't do X someone else will
- There are benefits for us and others in doing X
- Therefore it is morally acceptable for us to do X
- Therefore on occasion it is morally acceptable for us to do something not morally wrong for our own and others' benefit

## 2. Better if nobody did X

- It would be better if nobody did X
- But if we don't do X someone else will, causing greater harm
- There are benefits both for us and others in us doing X
- Therefore it is morally acceptable for us to do X
- Therefore on occasion it is morally acceptable for us to do X even though it would be better if nobody did X

# “If we don’t others will”

## Deontological Argument

- If something is wrong in itself we should not do it, even if others will and even if the consequences of our doing it are less harmful

# Deontological Argument

- Doing X is wrong
- But if we don't do X someone else will, causing greater harm
- There are benefits both for us and others in us doing X
- Therefore it is morally acceptable for us to do X
- Therefore on occasion it is morally acceptable for us to do what is morally wrong

# “If we don’ t others will”

- Does this argument lead to moral taint even if not to moral responsibility?
- We might not be morally responsible for the harms but we are morally responsible for who we are
- Not doing what we consider morally dubious on occasion can strengthen our resolve not to in the future (Larry May)

# “If we don’t others will”

## Some considerations

- How bad is the action?
- How much harm will it cause?
- How much less harm will be caused if we do it than if someone else does?
- How certain is it that if we don’t do it someone else will?

# Conclusion

- On consequentialist grounds the argument either unnecessary or dubious
- On deontological grounds always dubious
- Larry May: metaphysical guilt, moral taint