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COMMENT

Against Strong Emissions Sufficientarianism

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Introduction

In an award-winning article published in this journal, titled 'Emissions Sufficientarianism', Göran Duus-Otterström defends the following view.

> **Strong Emissions Sufficientarianism:** Each person has a moral right to produce the (net positive) number of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions needed to secure sufficiency, but all other GHG emissions are morally impermissible. (Duus-Otterström 2024, 284)[1]

By 'sufficiency', Duus-Otterström means the minimum level of well-being to which all humans are entitled. At first glance, strong emissions sufficientarianism might seem proportionate to the urgent need to reduce emissions while also respecting sufficiency's moral priority. Nevertheless, in this comment, I argue that strong emissions sufficientarianism should be rejected because it is too strict; it forbids morally significant GHG-emitting activities beyond sufficiency. Specifically, I contend that Duus-Otterström's argument for strong emissions sufficientarianism depends on the premise that it is not morally permissible to risk putting someone in a tragic choice situation for inessential reasons. I reject this premise because I argue that inessential but morally significant reasons may justify such impositions, even in the climate change context.

The Precautionary Argument

I share Duus-Otterström's assumption that it is *pro tanto* wrong to emit GHGs. Emitting causes harm by contributing to climate change, and, all things considered, we should not contribute to harm.[2] That said, we might be permitted to emit with reasonable justification. As Duus-Otterström points out, subsistence emissions are widely understood to be permissible because they are necessary to maintain sufficiency. Strong emissions sufficientarianism entails the significantly stronger claim that maintaining sufficiency is the only reasonable justification for emitting GHGs.

Consider my reconstruction of Duus-Otterström's argument for strong emissions sufficientarianism, which he calls the 'precautionary argument' (287).

The Precautionary Argument:

1. Subsistence emissions have moral priority (by assumption).

[1]Hereafter, citations for Duus-Otterström (2024) include only page numbers.

[2]For the sake of argument, I shall follow Duus-Otterström in assuming that individuals can contribute to harm by emitting.

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2. We do not know what the total number of subsistence emissions will be (by assumption).
3. All non-subsistence emissions produced for inessential reasons risk infringing on future people's opportunity to produce subsistence emissions without bringing about very dangerous climate change (by assumption).
4. It is impermissible to risk infringing, for inessential reasons, on future people's opportunity to produce subsistence emissions without bringing about very dangerous climate change.
Conclusion: All non-subsistence emissions are impermissible (strong emissions sufficientarianism) (from 3 and 4).

I assume that this argument is well-formed. Premise 1 is uncontroversial. I grant premises 2 and 3, for the sake of argument, but both require a brief explanation. Premise 2 makes the empirical assumption that humanity might be slow to decarbonize due to many factors, including the pace of technological development, population change, and political will.[3] Due to the non-trivial chance that the current generation might be slow to decarbonize, people could be dependent on fossil fuels to attain sufficiency for many decades to come. Hence, we do not know the total number of subsistence emissions that will be needed.

Premise 3 assumes that at some point in the future, given the uncertainty about how many subsistence emissions there will be, subsistence emitting could bring about very dangerous climate change. Appealing to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2021), Duus-Otterström identifies a 'reasonably safe' level of global warming with limiting warming to two degrees Celsius average global temperature relative to pre-industrial temperatures (281). I assume surpassing the two-degree threshold will cause dangerous climate change. If this limit is surpassed, then subsistence emitters would contribute to dangerous climate change. Hence, by using up the emissions in the reasonably safe range, non-subsistence emitters risk infringing, for inessential reasons, on the opportunity of people in the future to produce subsistence emissions without bringing about very dangerous climate change.

Duus-Otterström presents a challenge to those who, like me, find strong emissions sufficientarianism too strict. He claims that we must find a way to reject strong emissions sufficientarianism without rejecting either premise 1 or premise 2 (289). In this paper, I reject premise 4. Before doing so, I interpret premise 4 in terms of the moral permissibility of imposing tragic choices.

The Moral Significance of Imposing Tragic Choices

I assume that a tragic choice is a forced trade-off between two conflicting essential values (Tetlock et al. 2000; see also Barry 1984). Premise 3 establishes that in the absence of adequate decarbonization by the current generation, future subsistence emitters may face the tragic choice between protecting their own sufficiency and contributing to very dangerous climate change. Premise 4 holds that imposing this tragic choice situation is wrong. In my reading, premise 4 could be restated as a principle, which is articulated by Duus-Otterström: 'It would be wrong to risk imposing on future people the tragic choice between sacrificing themselves and contributing to very dangerous climate change' (287).

To understand why it might be wrong to impose tragic choices, consider Stephen Gardiner's (2010) analysis of tragic choice situations. He suggests that even if an agent facing a tragic choice makes no moral mistake, making the choice to sacrifice one essential value for another can leave a mark or a stain on the agent. Following Gardiner, I call these stains 'marring evils' (Gardiner 2010, 301). A marring evil is 'a negative moral evaluation of an agent's action (or actions), which is licensed when the agent (justifiably) chooses the lesser evil in a morally tragic situation and which

[3]Duus-Otterström's position is motivated by the need to take precaution in the face of the possibility of the current generation's moral failure.

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results in a serious negative moral assessment of that agent's life considered as a whole' (Gardiner 2010, 301). Future subsistence emitters would be forced to mar themselves if the choice between their own sufficiency and contributing to very dangerous climate change were forced upon them.

Next, consider the moral significance of putting others in a 'marring situation' – a choice situation in which the agent has a strong reason, or even a moral obligation, to opt for an evil option, and thereby mar themselves (Gardiner 2010, 302). Importantly, the imposition of a marring situation is distinct from the two kinds of harm Henry Shue (2014, 195–9) argues climate change involves. The first kind includes the diverse physical harms of climate change impacts (Shue 2014, 195). Marring situations involve negative moral evaluations of the agent, not direct physical harm. (Although, in extreme cases, marring situations could result in such harm [see Gardiner 2010, 301].) The second kind of harm is done by depriving people of the opportunity to use their share of the 'naturally determined maximum total [of global emissions] (for a sustainable economy that does not produce climate change)' (Shue 2014, 198). Marring evils are distinct from the harm of being deprived of a necessity. Indeed, the marring evil results from future people, justifiably, refusing to deprive themselves. As Duus-Otterström explains, 'If it turns out that future people must still emit GHGs, they can, and presumably will, do so, regardless of how much previous generations emitted' (287). Since imposing marring situations is distinct from both imposing direct physical harm and depriving others of basic needs, a separate analysis of the moral significance of imposing marring situations is needed.

According to Gardiner, imposing marring situations on others is a special kind of moral wrong that we have very strong reasons to avoid (Gardiner 2010, 302). However, I assume our reasons not to inflict marring situations can be overridden. For example, in a future without decarbonization, subsistence emitters may, in addition to contributing to dangerous climate change, permissibly (for essential reasons) impose the risk of marring situations on further future generations. In the absence of a complete account of the moral significance of imposing marring situations, I assume that such impositions require justification.

We can now interpret premise 4 as the claim that it is impermissible to risk imposing marring situations for inessential reasons in the climate change context. I now argue that premise 4 is problematic. Before turning to the more complex case of climate change, I consider everyday cases to establish that it is sometimes permitted to impose marring situations for inessential reasons.

Everyday Marring Situations

Consider an everyday case. The owner of a private tract of land is improving a narrow, switchbacked mountain road so that the public can more easily access a trailhead to a mountain lake. Anticipating that the construction site could impose risks, including the risk of imposing marring situations, she posts signage and takes reasonable safety measures. A motorbike rider descending the mountain road sees the warning signs and reduces his speed accordingly. Despite taking this precaution, he rounds a blind corner into the construction zone just as a construction worker is crossing the narrow, gravel roadway. In an instant, the rider faces a tragic choice between (a) driving over the cliff, likely killing himself, and (b) hitting the construction worker, likely killing her.[4] The rider hits the construction worker, and even though doing so is justifiable to save himself, he thereby suffers marring evil. Despite this tragedy, it is not obvious that the landowner has acted impermissibly by knowingly imposing the risk of this marring situation on the motorbike rider for inessential reasons.[5]

[4]I presume the risk of harm and of imposing marring situations is common on roadways. While it is unclear how many pedestrian deaths resulted from tragic choices, 4,911 pedestrians died in traffic incidents in the United States in 2022 (Naumann 2025).

[5]An anonymous reviewer for this journal objects that in the motorcyclist case, as long as the landowner meets their duty of care, she is not responsible for everyone who injures themselves on her property. Similarly, it could be argued that the non-

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The landowner could have eliminated the risk of imposing a marring situation on others by not improving the road. However, this option also has significant costs. Not improving the road has costs in the form of a loss of access to the beauty of the trail and the mountain lake. As Jonathan Wolff writes, 'Safety has a price, in terms of its impact on other things we want or value, and there are limits to what we are prepared to pay' (Wolff 2006, 411). Whether the road construction is permissible requires considering the question of justification as to whether the value of the construction project outweighs the risks, including the risk of imposing marring situations.

Trade-offs between benefits like recreation and the risk of imposing harm or marring situations are ubiquitous in the context of both private and public projects. For example, building a new sports stadium involves the risk of injury and death from workers being struck by falling objects (See Fried 2019). It is not difficult to imagine that the decision to build the stadium also imposes numerous risks of marring situations. For example, a person working at great heights could lose their balance and face the tragic choice between falling several stories to the scaffolding below and grabbing a safety railing while dropping the wrench they're holding in the direction of workers a hundred feet below.

The claim that it is impermissible to risk imposing marring situations for the sake of inessential reasons would have absurd results in everyday life because it would cause a state of deadlock in which almost no inessential projects would be permissible. As Barbara Fried argues in the context of direct harm imposition: 'If the mere possibility that an act could result in death or grave harm to others is sufficient to rule it out, then no act is permissible (except perhaps when necessary to save others from harm more severe than the proposed act threatens to impose)' (Fried 2019, 187). Even if we can assume that the risk of marring situations is less common than direct risk imposition, concerns about deadlock from a strict prohibition on imposing the risk of marring situations for inessential reasons would be similarly warranted.

In sum, in everyday cases, the risk of marring situations can be permissibly imposed in some situations for inessential reasons. However, premise 4 refers explicitly to the case of climate change, and the risk of imposing marring evils in the climate change context is significantly graver than in the examples just discussed. For example, a person who faces the tragic choice between their own sufficiency and contributing to very dangerous climate change could be deeply marred by choosing their own sufficiency.[6] It could be seriously wrong to impose this marring situation for inessential reasons. However, in what follows, I argue that it is not always impermissible to risk imposing marring choices for inessential reasons in the case of climate change.

The Strictness Objection

I begin with the assumption that to avoid irrationality and a host of other problems, a precautionary approach must take into account the potentially morally significant losses from taking precaution, even in the face of grave risk (Gardiner 2006). For example, depriving people of subsistence emissions is an unacceptable loss, even if (at some uncertain future stage) doing so were required to avoid the grave risks of very dangerous climate change. Given this moral weight, I assume that subsistence emissions can justify the risk of imposing marring situations on others. On the other hand, avoiding the loss of mere luxuries does nothing to justify imposing the risks of climate change. Indeed, luxury emissions are considered impermissible because they have no moral weight and consequently impose risks without reasonable justification (Baatz 2014;

negligent landowner is not responsible for any of the tragic choices faced on their property. In response, the question of whether the landowner should be held responsible (in terms of compensation owed) is distinct from the question of whether the landowner's conduct is morally permissible in the first place (See Duus-Otterström 2023, 923–927; Fried 2012, 237). The question of permissibility, which is my focus, concerns justification. It requires considering whether the goal of road improvement is a worthy one and whether doing so is of greater value than doing otherwise, given the ineliminable risks for all involved.

[6]For a related example of an entire generation facing this trade-off, see Gardiner (2009, 152).

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Shue 1993). Given that they are morally weightless, I assume that luxury emissions cannot justify the risk of imposing marring situations on others. However, these fixed points are silent about the range of non-subsistence emissions between luxury and subsistence. It is not obvious that all non-subsistence emissions are impermissible in the way that luxury emissions are, even though they lack the priority of subsistence emissions (Francis 2025; Traxler 2002; see also Shue 2013, 392, n. 32). I argue that the strong emissions sufficiency is too strict because premise 4 of the precautionary argument fails to adequately consider potentially morally significant losses above the sufficiency threshold, which I contend are weighty enough to justify imposing marring situations.[7]

Whether strong emissions sufficientarianism is too strict depends in part on what subsistence emissions are. As Duus-Otterström argues, strong emissions sufficientarianism will have different implications for the current generation when sufficiency is understood in different ways.

> Suppose we endorse the view that everyone is entitled to a comfortable standard of living as a matter of sufficiency. In that case, the implications are not very radical, considering that what must then be given up are 'luxuries' (Shue 1993). If, on the other hand, we equate sufficiency with ... [the view that everyone is entitled to basic survival],[8] then strong emissions sufficientarianism will look more radical, requiring us to forego many of the things we now take for granted. (288)

Hence, if we were to understand sufficiency in terms of basic survival, which is defined as living a life of a normal length without significant impairment (Duus-Otterström 2023, 922), strong emissions sufficientarianism would forbid ordinary activities that are of utmost importance to people's quality of life. It would forbid activities such as using indoor electricity in the evening for the sake of pursuing a hobby or even studying for school. When survival is understood in terms of basic survival, strong emissions sufficientarianism is unduly strict; indeed, it is quite harsh.

But Duus-Otterström blocks this implication by understanding sufficiency in terms of meeting basic needs (288), which he describes in another paper as vital interests leading to a minimally good life (Duus-Otterström 2023, 922). When sufficiency is understood in terms of basic needs, Duus-Otterström could argue that strong emissions sufficientarianism is not unreasonably strict, because it would permit – as subsistence emissions – emitting activities needed to achieve a decent standard of living, including the use of indoor electricity in support of various activities and the use of appliances (for example, rice cookers and laundry machines) if these are deemed necessary for the achievement of a minimally good life. Given the moral priority of these goods and activities, it could be argued that they justify the risk of imposing marring situations on future generations, but goods and activities beyond sufficiency do not.

However, the strictness objection still applies when sufficiency is understood in terms of basic needs. I argue that at least some inessential emissions are produced for reasons that are weighty enough to justify the risk of imposing marring situations in the climate change context. These non-subsistence emissions include emissions from morally significant activities, practices, and improvements in quality of life that are (a) central to individuals' identities and projects; (b) important to families, cultures, and communities; and/or (c) contributing to the betterment of human civilization, especially in the context of the arts and humanities.

Consider the example of education. On Narashima Rao and Min's (2018) account of decent living standards, a minimally decent life requires, among other things, nine to twelve years of

[7]It could be objected that strong emissions sufficientarianism is not too strict because the benefits I mention cannot justify the direct harm from climate change that they impose. However, this claim requires defense and is beyond the scope of this debate. (For discussion, see Francis 2017, 2025.) This section focuses exclusively on questions of justification related to the imposition of marring situations.

[8]I have amended the quote by interpreting the phrase 'barely scraping by' in terms of basic survival.

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education.[9] So, on Rao and Min's view of decency, strong emissions sufficientarianism would prohibit the emissions generated in acquiring a university education. This seems unduly strict. It would be a profound loss for individuals, cultures, societies, and even human civilization if climate policy were to prohibit people from getting a university education when doing so emits GHGs. Avoiding such profound loss is an inessential reason weighty enough to justify the risk of imposing marring situations.

In reply, a defender of strong emissions sufficientarianism could argue that the correct understanding of sufficiency could cover any activities that are weighty enough to override the moral significance of avoiding marring situations. For example, it might be argued that individuals require a university education in societies where it is socially necessary to have a comfortable standard of living. (Duus-Otterström mentions but does not endorse this definition of sufficiency [288].) My first response is that we must be cautious about determining the level of sufficiency by appealing to social necessity as this could invite the rationalization of high-emitting activities usually considered luxury emissions (for example, driving gas-guzzlers) by appeal to ways of life or societal identity (for example, the American way of life) (Gardiner 2004; see also Francis 2025, c.f. Traxler 2002). Climate ethics is, in part, a critical project about identifying what kinds of societies we ought to have in a climate-constrained world (Jamieson 1992).

Secondly, the strategy of moving up the sufficiency threshold to respond to the strictness objection runs the risk of making the subsistence emissions category so capacious that it loses its moral priority. This has implications for the precautionary argument. If what counts as subsistence emissions is inflated considerably for the sake of mitigating the strictness of climate policy, we also must inflate what counts as a subsistence emission for the sake of evaluating the choice situation of people in the future. If we draw the sufficiency threshold at the level of a comfortable standard of living, then it is not clear whether future subsistence emitters face a tragic choice at all. Instead, they may face a trade-off between their own comfort and contributing to dangerous climate change. On this understanding of sufficiency, premise 4 is false. It is permissible to risk, for inessential reasons, infringing on future people's opportunity to produce emissions to maintain comfort without bringing about very dangerous climate change.

A stronger response to the strictness objection and my example of university education appeals to the distinction Duus-Otterström makes between direct and indirect emissions (283).[10] Direct subsistence-emitting activities are necessary to secure the sufficiency of the agent who physically released them. Indirect subsistence-emitting activities are necessary to secure the sufficiency of someone, no matter who physically released them. Duus-Otterström understands the expression 'produce emissions' broadly enough to include indirect emissions (283). So, if a person attends university to become a medical doctor or a cancer scientist, and people depend on medical doctors and cancer scientists to secure sufficiency, then the emissions produced in doing so are indirect subsistence emissions. Hence, strong emissions sufficientarianism would not forbid a university education when it is required to secure the basic needs of others. It may also be the case that some amount of knowledge in mathematics, science, the humanities, and social sciences is required for educating children to the level requisite for meeting basic needs. Accordingly, strong emissions sufficientarianism can justify emitting activities related to the pursuit of people's professional and personal projects, when these pursuits contribute directly or indirectly to subsistence.

However, this reply does not entirely succeed against the strictness objection. There are a wide number of pursuits in higher education that are not strictly necessary for subsistence directly or indirectly, but are of utmost importance to cultures, communities, individuals, and human civilization. Unlike professional degrees in medicine or science degrees in cancer research, degrees in literature, philosophy, political philosophy, music, art, history, dance, theater, and many others do not directly or indirectly contribute to meeting the basic needs of others. Nevertheless, these

[9]Duus-Otterström does not provide an enumeration of what counts as sufficiency, which is beyond his scope.

[10]Thanks to Duus-Otterström for raising this objection.

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pursuits are requisite for the life of the mind, public art, music, and the pursuit of knowledge, not to mention personal projects that give meaning to people's lives. Disallowing the pursuit of these subjects because they produce non-subsistence emissions would be a deeply regrettable loss for contemporary communities and cultures because of the moral and aesthetic value of the pursuit of the arts and humanities. Avoiding the profound loss of these important but inessential activities could justify imposing marring situations on others.

However, in defense of strong emissions sufficiency, Duus-Otterström allows for the possibility that if restricting an emissions activity would jeopardize someone's sufficiency, then that emissions activity is not prima facie impermissible (289).[11] Imagine that an aggressive climate change policy eliminated university education for unnecessary fields like literature. Implementing such a policy would result in economic chaos as faculty and administrators would lose their jobs, students would have less success in the job market because they lack a well-rounded liberal arts education, and, eventually, markets in the book and film industries would be impacted. Hence, strong emissions sufficiency would not require such radical changes to our society. Such changes would create market chaos, impacting people's sufficiency.

As I understand it, the economic chaos reply is an excellent argument against implementing bad climate policies. It would be bad policy to immediately curtail all university education for unnecessary professions. However, it is possible to design a reasonable policy to reduce emissions from education in unnecessary fields without bringing about economic chaos. Assuming that there are reasonable policy options that would not result in economic chaos or cascading negative effects, strong emissions sufficiency would still license the restriction of inessential university education. Indeed, assuming good climate policies could be designed and implemented that don't result in a cascade of negative outcomes, strong emissions sufficientarianism would promote the indiscriminate elimination of many non-subsistence/non-luxury emitting activities of significant ethical, public, and personal value.

Premise 4 in the precautionary argument is too strict because it fails to distinguish between emitting activities that have no or very little moral weight and inessential but morally important emitting activities. Rather than prohibiting all risks of imposing marring situations for inessential reasons in the climate change context and therefore all non-subsistence emissions, we should consider which non-subsistence emissions justify the risk of imposing marring situations and which do not. I have focused on making the case that inessential emitting activities associated with higher education hold such weight. And there are many additional areas of private and public life in which non-subsistence emissions are generated to support similarly morally weighty goods and values.

Conclusion

All parties to this debate agree that we should work to decouple well-being and fossil fuel emissions as soon as possible. Doing so will remove the non-trivial chance that the current generation could fail to decarbonize, which would make premise 2 of the precautionary argument false. With adequate decarbonization, no or very few subsistence emitters will ever have to rely on fossil fuels for sufficiency. Until this point is achieved, Duus-Otterström argues that we should take precaution by adopting strong emissions sufficientarianism. I disagree on the grounds that strong emissions sufficientarianism is too strict and would require taking precautionary action at too great a cost.

Instead of forbidding all non-subsistence emissions, I argue we ought to identify and safeguard inessential emitting activities that outweigh the risk of imposing marring situations on future people. In my approach, any precautionary measures must not be at the expense of meaningful activities, practices, and projects. This may entail allowing a higher quantity of emissions than

[11]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this objection.

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strong emissions sufficientarianism would. However, another implication of my view is that in making emissions cuts in the non-subsistence range, we ought to prioritize morally important areas of public and private life. This prioritization could involve emissions allowances, but it also ought to involve investments in green energy in these areas to ensure their survival in a climate-constrained world.

Data availability statement. Replication data for this Article can be found at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123426101549

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