

# Asymmetry of Responsibilities: When Common Morality Plays Against Sustainability

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SGBE-Seminar, Bigorio, 20.01.2024

# Examples of medical practices or prescriptions that negatively impact our environment while more sustainable alternatives are available

Ecologically impactful practice

Alternative (somehow outdated, more cumbersome, slightly less efficient)



Helicopter transportation



Ambulance transportation

# Examples of medical practices or prescriptions that negatively impact our environment while more sustainable alternatives are available

## Ecologically impactful practice

## Alternative (somehow outdated, more cumbersome, slightly less efficient)

- X-ray or MRI to confirm an almost certain diagnosis
- upon demand of the future mum, one more ultrasound to see the beautiful baby



- Renounce
- Refuse to do it



# Examples of medical practices or prescriptions that negatively impact our environment while more sustainable alternatives are available

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Alternative (somehow outdated, more cumbersome, slightly less efficient)

Take the time to check the "Hazard Score" of available drug alternatives before prescribing (and take the risk that patients call back because they cannot obtain the product immediately in their local pharmacy).



The screenshot shows the Janusinfo logo for Region Stockholm at the top. Below the logo is a navigation menu with the following items: [Start/](#), [Beslutsstöd/](#), [Läkemedel och miljö/](#), [Pharmaceuticals and Environment/](#), and [Classificati](#). The main heading is "Classification". Below it is the sub-heading "Introduction" followed by the text "The environmental classification of pharmaceutical substances".

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Inhalation device with propellant gas (> 20kg CO<sub>2</sub> per inhaler) to treat a respiratory illness

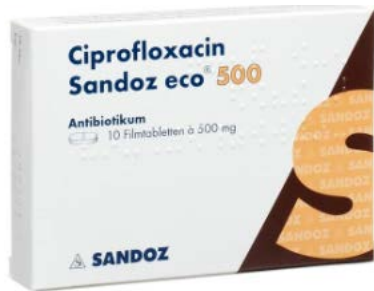
Inhalation device working with mechanical inspiration of the patient (< 1kg CO<sub>2</sub> per inhaler)

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Medical prescription to treat a patient's urinary tract infections because she is accustomed to this product

Replace with a less impactful treatment of urinary tract infection

# Examples of medical practices or prescriptions that negatively impact our environment while more sustainable alternatives are available

## Ecologically impactful practice

Prescribe an additional medication to treat a new symptom that arises at end of life or during a chronic illness



## Alternative (somehow outdated, more cumbersome, slightly less efficient)

- Provide advices and tips for a healthy lifestyle
- Conduct an advance care planning procedure with patients (discuss life goals and appropriate therapeutic care)



# If you don't make those sustainable choices, how much are you *responsible*?

**Sustainability requirement** = requirement to make more environmentally sustainable choices (i.e. less energy-consuming, less environmentally impacting)  
→ can be assessed in the light of the severity of the deprecations

## Causal responsibility



To what extent does the behaviour or action cause environmental deprecations?

## Environmental responsibility (sustainability requirement)



To what extent should the agent be held responsible for these deprecations?

## Moral Responsibility



To what extent should the agent live up to its environmental responsibility?



## Relevant sense of environmental responsibility = practical responsibility

The concept we choose should make it possible to set sustainability requirements that are proportionate to the skills and power of action of individuals.

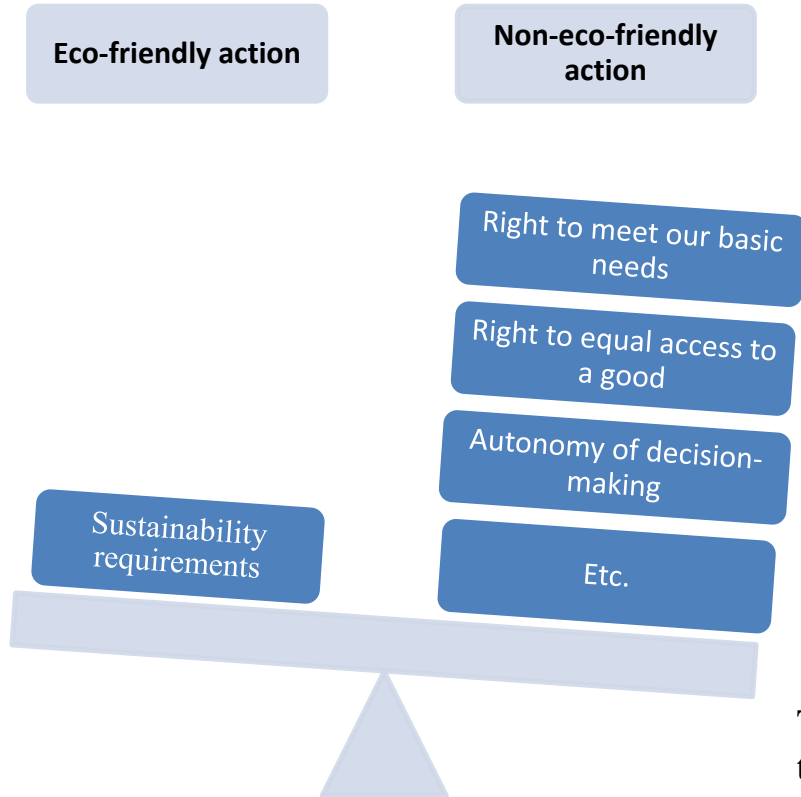
Responsibility is a matter of degree

Ability to think about the available options, weight them, and on that basis, make choices that are consistent with one's values, preferences, and real needs

Minimal conditions for attributing practical responsibility	
<b>Condition 1</b>	Actors are responsible for actions and lifestyle choices, rather than states of affairs (e.g. illness)
<b>Condition 2</b>	Responsibility depends on the existence of minimally valuable choice options
<b>Condition 3</b>	Responsibility requires some prior knowledge of existing options, their causal effect, and their overall value
<b>Condition 4</b>	Responsibility depends on actors' minimal <i>level of control*</i> over their choices

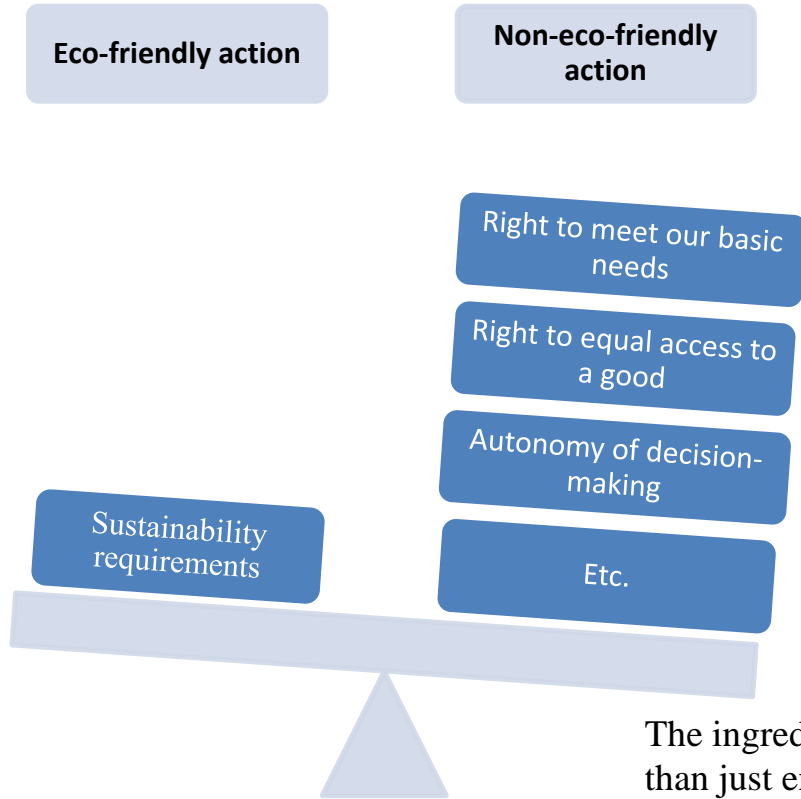
Clavien, C., & Hurst, S. (2020). The undeserving sick? an evaluation of patients' responsibility for their health condition. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 29.

# What is the *moral* weight of sustainability requirements?



The ingredients of a global moral assessment are more encompassing than merely taking into account sustainability requirements

# What is the moral weight of sustainability requirements?



Even if the moral relevance of the sustainability requirements is indisputable, it is almost systematically attenuated or counterbalanced by other rights and values that produce conflicting injunctions.

The ingredients of a comprehensive moral assessment are more encompassing than just environmental responsibility including its sustainability requirements

# Eco-friendly (sustainable) behaviour is altruistic

Moral responsibility is systematically less demanding than environmental responsibility.

=> Eco-friendly behaviour exceeds the ordinary requirements of morality: it is supererogatory (i.e. praiseworthy, but not morally demanded or expected).

Basically, it is a form of altruism: one decides, without external pressure, to constrain oneself or to make some self-sacrifice for the benefit of others.





Eco-friendly action

Non-eco-friendly action

Right to meet our basic needs

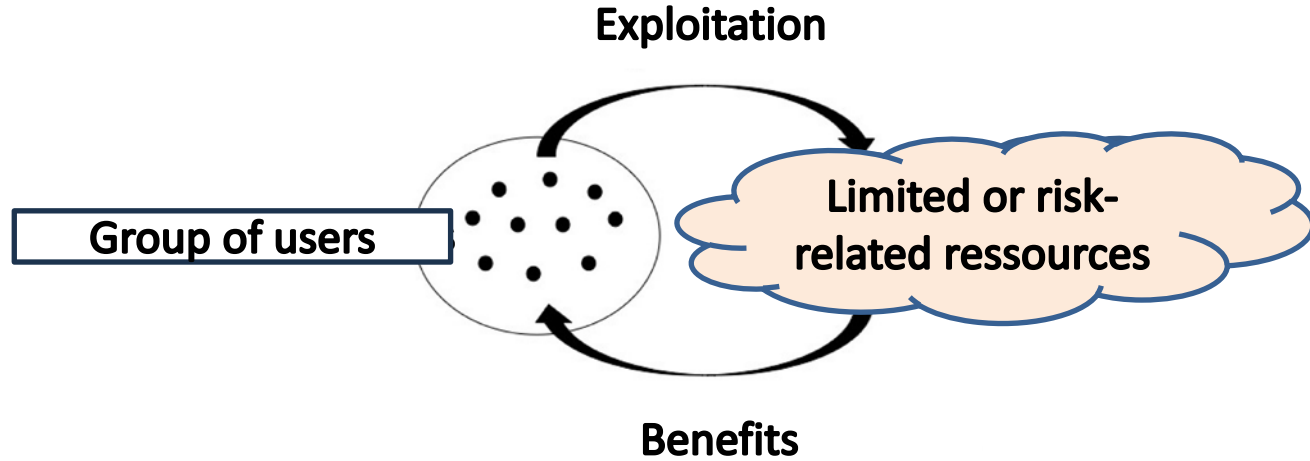
Right to equal access to a good

Autonomy of decision-making

Etc.

Sustainability requirements

# The Tragedy of the Commons



Long-term collective interest = preserving the limited resources  
But if the resources are available to everyone + profitable, they will be quickly overexploited (by people leading an ordinary life)  
→ competition → tragedy



Eco-friendly action

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Right to meet our basic needs

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Sustainability requirements

Etc.

**Moral responsibility is therefore of no help to our long-term survival, quite the contrary...**

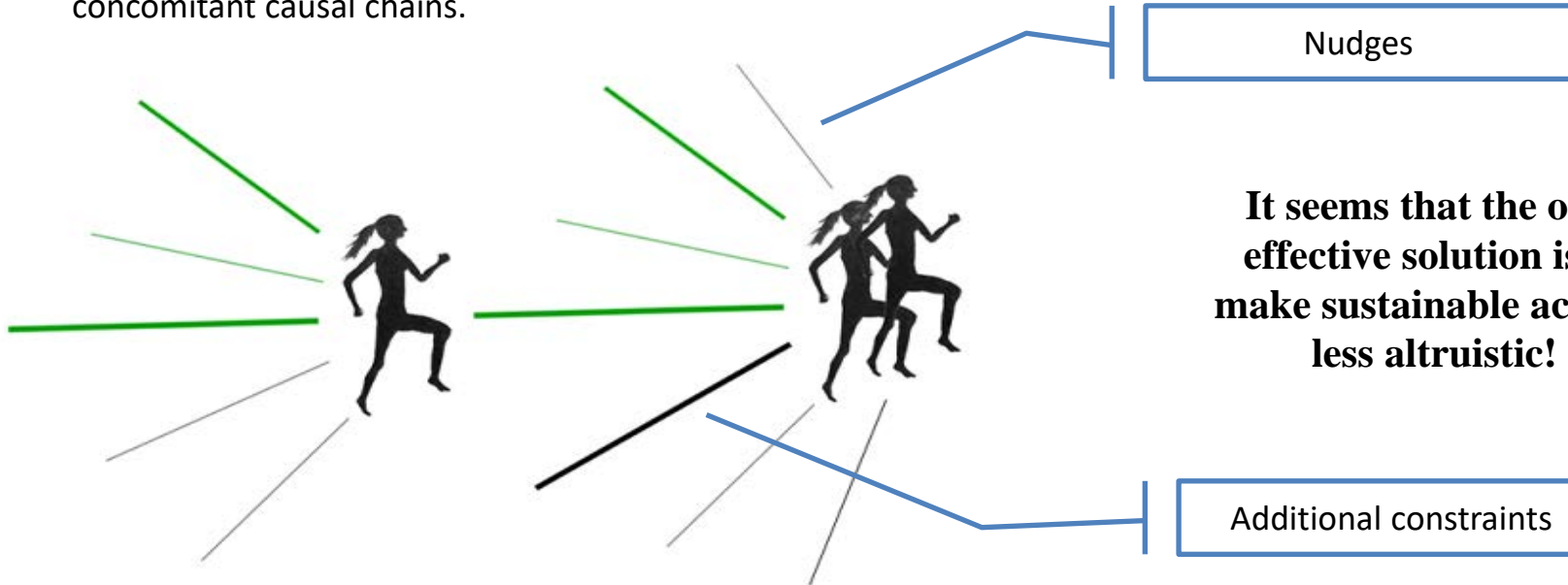
This is partly due to the fact that many polluting inventions and technologies are the source of social and moral progress.

Inventions and technologies developed before the awakening of ecological consciousness are social gains to which it is socially and morally perilous to renounce.

**So what can be done?**

## Intervening on the causal chains

Decisions to act are most often the result of a multitude of concomitant causal chains.



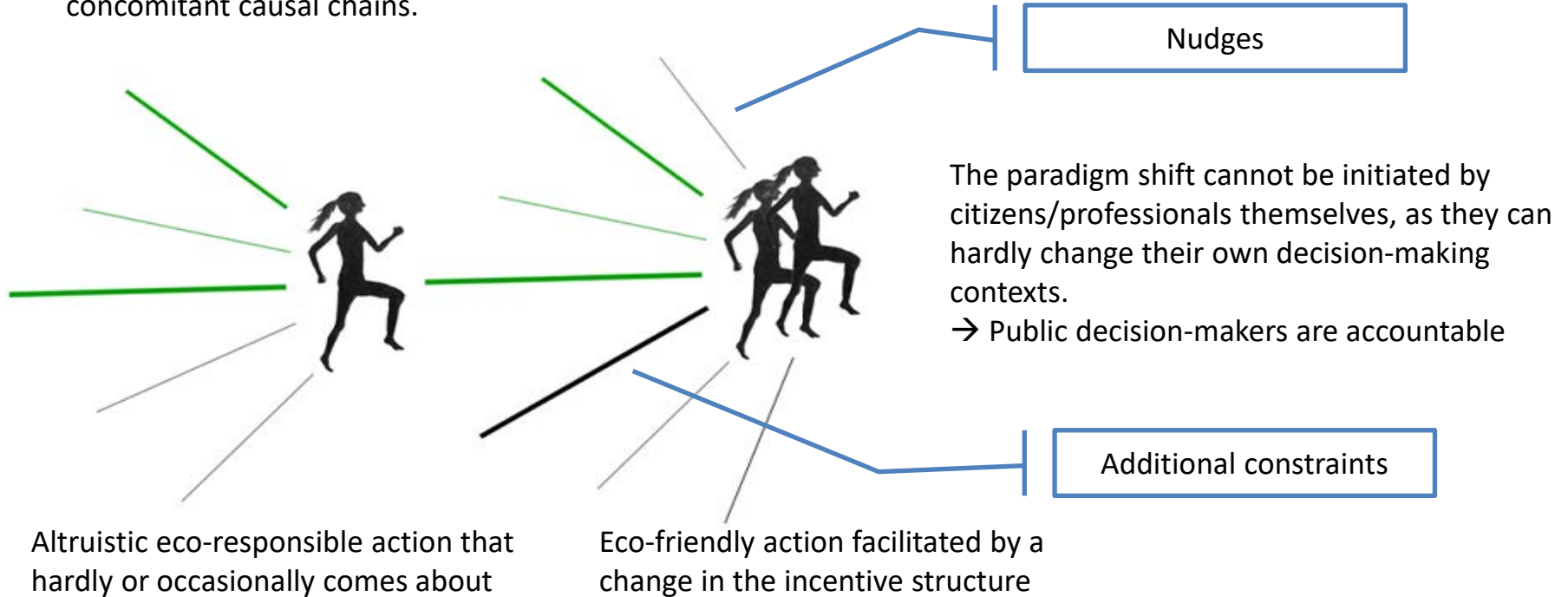
**It seems that the only effective solution is to make sustainable actions less altruistic!**

Altruistic eco-friendly action that hardly or occasionally comes about

Eco-friendly action facilitated by a change in the incentive structure

## Intervening on the causal chains

Decisions to act are most often the result of a multitude of concomitant causal chains.





## **To conclude...**

For an obvious practical reason, the tragedy of the commons pushes us to promote the sustainability requirement: we want to avoid the deterioration of our living conditions and the collapse of humanity.

Other values and principles (autonomy, equality, etc.) still hold, but may have to be subsumed under the requirement of sustainability.