

CONSUMER COMPLICITY AND THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUAL CAUSAL EFFICACY

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A SUPERMARKET orders meat from a company that runs factory farms that cause the suffering and death of millions of animals. A cellular phone company sources out their manufacturing to factories with egregious labor standards. Is it wrong for an individual consumer to purchase from such companies? We might think it is because making a purchase contributes to the harms or injustices that result from the company's actions. But we also might think that this is mistaken. Is it always the case that an individual's particular purchase contributes to a company's harm or wrongdoing? What about when the company from whom she is purchasing has millions of customers and billions of dollars in revenue? Or, when its decisions about production practices are not being made with an eye to how many units are being consumed at each particular moment? In these cases, claims about the morality of making a particular purchase seem to face the problem of "individual causal inefficacy."¹

It has been difficult to explain why a purchase that makes little to no difference to a producer's wrongdoing is itself morally wrong. Some have recently appealed to the concept of complicity in order to support the idea that consumers have a moral reason to avoid purchasing from companies engaged in wrongdoing. In this paper, I contribute to the development of this direction in consumer ethics. First, I explore how we should define moral complicity. Chiara Lepora and Robert Goodin provide a comprehensive analysis of complicity that captures key aspects of the concept.² In particular, they argue that an act counts as morally complicit if, and only if, it makes a causal contribution to the wrongdoing of another agent. But this definition of complicity seems to send us right back to the problem of individual causal inefficacy. In response, some have claimed that an individual's purchase still makes them complicit in such situations because they are still knowingly joining in with the wrong that the company or other consumers are doing. I argue, however, that it is difficult

1 Hiller, "Climate Change and Individual Responsibility."

2 Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*.

to see making a purchase as a form of joining in a joint or group action. Instead, I respond to the causal inefficacy problem directly. I argue that even when the outcome is massively overdetermined, an individual purchase still makes a *causal contribution* to the principal harm or wrongdoing, even if it does not *make a difference* to that harm or wrongdoing.

This addresses the concern with applying Lepora and Goodin's conception of moral complicity—a purchaser can become complicit by making a purchase in such cases—but it does not resolve the deeper question of whether and why she should not be complicit. The issue is with how small the causal contribution such an individual purchase makes in cases of massive overdetermination. For the concept of moral complicity to gain traction here, I argue that we may have to appeal to normative concerns besides the outcome of the complicit action. While I argue such concerns are relevant, I conclude that this supplemental normative understanding of moral complicity cannot simply get us around the issue of minimal causal contribution, nor will it support the claim that purchasing from companies is usually all-things-considered morally wrong.

1. COMPLICITY AS CAUSAL CONTRIBUTION AND THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUAL CAUSAL EFFICACY

To explore the notion of consumer complicity further, we need a definition of what makes an agent morally complicit in the wrongdoing of another. In the law, complicity is often understood in terms of the crime of aiding and abetting. Someone who aids and abets does not actually commit the main crime, but helps another person or group commit it.³ Lepora and Goodin have developed a definition of moral complicity by extending this line of thinking. They argue that the fundamental element that makes someone complicit with the wrongdoing of a principal agent is that they knowingly act in a way that helps a principal wrongdoing succeed or be worse. They argue for a set of minimal conditions for one to be morally responsible for an act of complicity.

First, the action must make a causal contribution to the principal agent's wrongdoing (it must have "aided" or "helped") and that act must have been "neither involuntary nor accidental."⁴ Second, the agent must have reasonably

3 For example, Andy draws a floor plan of a bank for Bill, despite knowing Bill's intention to rob the bank. After Bill commits the robbery, Alice picks him up from the bank and drives him to a safehouse he has set up. Both Andy and Alice can be charged with aiding and abetting. It is true that they did not actually rob the bank, but because they should have reasonably believed that Bill was planning to rob the bank, and they performed an action that helped him with his crime, they are potentially criminally complicit.

4 Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*, 83.

believed (or should have reasonably believed) that the principal agent was engaged in wrongdoing or had a wrongful plan and that their action would causally contribute to that wrongdoing.⁵ If these conditions are met, however minimally, Lepora and Goodin argue that the act is morally wrong and the complicit agent has, as they put it, a moral case to answer. They also emphasize that, like all wrongful actions, an act of complicity can be more or less *pro tanto* wrong and may not be all things considered wrong.

For the purposes of exploring the effect that the problem of individual causal inefficacy has on this definition, I would like to bracket the question of whether its epistemic conditions are or could ever be met in the case of complex, mediated, and sometimes global supply chains and production practices.⁶ I would also like to bracket questions about whether the actions of the sort under consideration—running concentrated animal-feeding operations, hiring workers at below living wages, etc.—always count as wrongdoing. Lepora and Goodin's definition of moral complicity confirms that these questions have relevance for claims about consumer complicity. Still, if a customer's purchase does not make any causal contribution to the wrongdoing or harm this would, from the start, imply that the customer is not complicit.

To explore the applicability of their definition of complicity further, let us look at an imagined case.

Bob's Dresses: Aisha sees a cart set up in a mall with a sign that reads "Bob's Dresses." Arrayed on Bob's cart are dresses with the most beautiful and distinctive embroidery Aisha has ever seen. She asks Bob where they are made. Bob explains, "I own a factory in a country where slavery is legal, and I own a number of slaves there, many of them children." Aisha is in disbelief at the wrongful practices Bob uses to produce the dresses. She thinks it would be wrong to buy a dress now that she knows about those practices because doing so would make her complicit with slavery.

According to Lepora and Goodin's definition of moral complicity, we must ask whether Aisha's purchase will causally contribute to the success of Bob's wrongful plan. Say that Bob's plan is to make money by selling dresses produced by child slaves and that doing so is morally wrong. If Aisha gives him money, it serves as part of his revenue stream, thereby supporting his continued wrongdoing. Moreover, if Aisha did not buy the dress, it is likely that Bob's revenue would have been smaller in a way that he might notice and take account of in

5 Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*, 81–83.

6 Kingston, "Shopping with a Conscience?"

his production plans. By refusing to buy the dress, Aisha's act appears able to have some effect on the success of Bob's ongoing plan.

Now, take a related but different imagined case.

Big Box: Carla is walking through national retailer Big Box's store. She sees a table set out with dresses with the most beautiful and distinctive embroidery she has ever seen. She wonders where they are made and searches for information about them online. She finds out from the Boycott Big Box website that Big Box purchases them from factories that use child slavery. Carla is in disbelief at the wrongful practices used to produce the dresses. She thinks it would be wrong to buy one now that she knows this because it would make her complicit with child slavery.

For the purposes of argument, let us say that Big Box's act of purchasing dresses from producers engaged in wrongful plans is itself wrong.⁷ Many have the intuition that, like Aisha, Carla would be complicit with wrongdoing by purchasing the dress. Yet, when we apply Lepora and Goodin's conception of complicity to Big Box, we may not get that result.

This is because we might think that their conception of complicity loses traction when the consumer-producer relationship is one with the size, scope, or structure of many contemporary retail markets. In such markets, whether or not an individual customer makes a purchase might be expected to have no effect on what the company does. In Big Box, this may be because the company reasonably believes that sales of particular dresses will fluctuate each month, and the question of which dresses to stock will be sensitive to this. But it may also be because they reasonably believe that some dresses will not be sold within a set timeframe and will need to be put on clearance or discarded completely. All of this will likely be built into their plans and pricing from the outset. This means that, from the company's perspective, whether Carla buys the dress or not, the outcome will be identical. They will also have no reason to infer that the explanation for one more dress on the rack is Carla's moral outrage and not normal market dynamics. Large retailers usually expect the vast majority of individual customers to have some personal reason or another not to buy each of the particular products they offer.

For these reasons, it is not clear that any purchase, or refusal to purchase, will influence the success, extent, or severity of Big Box's wrongdoing. As Mark Budolfson puts it,

7 Again, this is an assumption made in order to focus specifically on the issue of causal inefficacy.

if the inefficacy objection is correct that when supply chains are long and complex an individual's consumption cannot be expected to make a difference to *the quantity produced*, then an individual's consumption also cannot be expected to make a difference to *the revenues of producers* for the same reasons. This undermines the more general claim of ethical consumerism that by purchasing morally objectionable products one is *complicit in evil* in an objectionable way because one thereby *supports* objectionable firms *by voting with one's dollars* in a way that benefits those firms.⁸

Yet, some ethical consumers appeal to the concept of complicity in order to describe the morality of situations where they recognize that their purchasing decisions do not make a difference. Someone might say, "Yes, I know my purchase won't make a difference, but I still will not buy from Big Box because I do not wish to be complicit with these injustices." Also, it might seem intuitive that both Aisha and Carla are morally complicit by purchasing a dress. Why should appealing to the structure or size of the market remove complicity? Is not one still knowingly choosing to participate in all of this? Finally, we may even get the worrisome result that Aisha becomes aware of this problem and decides she will only buy slave-made dresses from Big Box so that she can avoid being complicit with slavery.⁹ It is therefore worth exploring further whether the problem of causal inefficacy undermines the applicability of moral complicity to consumer cases like these.

2. CAUSAL CONTRIBUTION AND COMPLICITY

I think the strongest response to the problem is to recognize that complicity does not require that one's action *make a difference* to the success, extent, or severity of the principal agent's wrongdoing, only that it makes a *causal contribution* to that wrongdoing. In this section, I suggest that Carla's purchase makes a causal contribution to Big Box's wrongdoing even when the success, extent, and severity of her wrongdoing is overdetermined. But this causal contribution is likely to be very small. I conclude that the difficulty with applying the concept of moral complicity to cases like this does not lie with the definition of complicity itself, but with the normative reasons we have such that we should try to avoid being complicit with the wrongdoing of others.

As I argued above, the concept of complicity at its core involves helping or aiding another in doing wrong. If Carla's purchase will have no effect on the

8 Budolfson, "Is It Wrong to Eat Meat from Factory Farms?" 92.

9 Driver, "Individual Consumption and Moral Complicity," 67–68.

success, extent, or severity of Big Box's wrongdoing, how can it count as helping or aiding them? Put another way, in such a situation, would not refusing to buy the dress also have no effect on the success, extent, or severity of Big Box's wrongdoing? It therefore seems like we cannot appeal to the notion of helping or aiding to explain why Carla is complicit in these cases. The reason it seems this way is that here the wrongdoing is causally overdetermined. Still, I argue that someone who performs an action that makes a relevant contribution to that overdetermination still counts as a causal contributor to the overdetermined outcome. This is all that is needed for us to see why Carla's purchase still makes her complicit.

Recall that whether Carla purchases or not will have no effect on Big Box's wrongdoing because the way they make decisions about what products to produce/stock are not sensitive to individual purchasing decisions. But such decisions must be responsive to consumer demand at some level and Big Box remaining in business in part depends on this. So, there must be some number of consumers whose decision not to buy a particular product (for whatever reason) would signal to Big Box that there is insufficient demand for the product to make it worth their while to spend money producing or stocking it.¹⁰ The reason Carla's purchase will have no effect on Big Box's wrongdoing is because the number of other customers purchasing slave-made dresses is far above this threshold number, meaning their wrongdoing is overdetermined.

Let us say that the threshold number is ten thousand and let us say that one million slave-made dresses are purchased from Big Box by other consumers each year. The current number of consumers is therefore much higher than the threshold number at which a shift in consumer demand might lead Big Box to stop producing/stocking such dresses. Whether Carla purchases a dress or not, therefore, will have no effect on their wrongdoing because whether one million or one million and one people buy a slave-made dress will not make a difference to Big Box's wrongdoing. But being customer number one million and one still means that Carla makes some sort of causal contribution to Big Box's plans that she would not make if she refused to buy the dress.

While the correct account of causation is a contentious and unsettled question, the sense that Carla still counts as a causal contributor is supported by intuitions in other relevant cases. It is natural to think that *X* causes *Y* if and only if *X* is a necessary condition for *Y*'s occurrence such that, "but for" *X*, *Y* would not have occurred. For example, James throws a rock that hits Chen in the head, killing him. James caused Chen's death because, had James not thrown

10 Kagan, "Do I Make a Difference?"; Norcross, "Puppies, Pigs, and People"; Singer, "Utilitarianism and Vegetarianism."

the rock, Chen would not have died (at that time and in that way). But what if ten thousand uncoordinated strangers each throw a rock at Chen, all the rocks hit him at the same time, and ten rocks hitting Chen would be enough to kill him? Chen is hit by ten thousand rocks, leading to his death. I have the intuition that each rock thrower wrongfully causes Chen's death and that each rock thrower should not have thrown a rock. But if X must have been a necessary condition for Y in order to say that X caused Y , why would we think this? No individual's rock throw is necessary to cause Chen's death, since if one person did not throw a rock, Chen would still have been killed. Yet, I am reluctant to say that no individual of the ten thousand rock throwers caused Chen's death, or that no individual acted wrongly by throwing a rock. Chen's death was causally overdetermined, and each individual made a causal contribution to that overdetermined wrongful harm by throwing a rock.

Similarly, if less than ten thousand customers buying a slave-made dress would signal a shift in demand that would affect Big Box's wrongdoing, and Carla chooses to become purchaser one million and one, she is a causal contributor to Big Box's wrongdoing despite that wrongdoing being overdetermined. Carla might not be identical to a rock thrower who directly causes some share of Chen's wrongful death, but she is still a causal contributor to the wrongdoing that Big Box does. Perhaps her act is not as morally wrong as a rock thrower, but it still makes her complicit with the wrongdoing that Big Box does (and I explore the morality of that below).

These intuitions about overdetermination, causal contribution, and moral responsibility are supported by views of causation that recognize that outcomes can be the result of a set of antecedent conditions or a "joint cause."¹¹ In the rock-throwing case, ten thousand people threw rocks and only ten were needed to kill Chen. We might say that ten of the ten thousand rocks killed him, but which ten? The full set of rocks struck him at the same time and thus the full set of rocks counts as those that caused the threshold to be passed. This idea is supported by an account of causation that holds that X causes Y if X is a necessary element of a sufficient set (NESS) of actual antecedent conditions for Y 's occurrence.¹² This "NESS test" could help explain why an act can make one a causal contributor to an outcome in cases where there are thresholds, even if one's individual act was not necessary for crossing that threshold.

For example, suppose it takes three votes for a measure to pass, but four people (A , B , C , and D) vote. In that situation, each person's vote was neither

11 Harman, "Eating Meat as a Morally Permissible Moral Mistake," 219.

12 Barry and Øverland, "Individual Responsibility for Carbon Emissions"; Hart and Honoré, *Causation in the Law*; Wright, "Causation in Tort Law."

sufficient (one vote is not enough) nor necessary (three votes would have been enough) for the measure to pass. There are four sets of possible actions that are minimally sufficient for the outcome: *ABC*, *ABD*, *ACD*, and *BCD*. Still, what happened was that *ABCD* voted. While *A* could claim that their vote is not necessary for the outcome since *BCD* also voted, *A*'s vote was still a necessary part of the actual set of actions that was sufficient for the outcome (*ABCD*). If *A* had not voted, the actual set of actions that would have been sufficient would have been different: *BCD*. *A*'s vote therefore still counts as "a cause" of the outcome.¹³

Similarly, let us assume that ten thousand purchases are a sufficient condition of the success, extent, or severity of Big Box's plan, but Big Box has ten million actual customers, one of whom is Carla. Carla could claim that her purchase is neither necessary nor sufficient for the success, extent, or severity of Big Box's plan, and that she is therefore not a cause of what they do and is not complicit for that reason. Yet, her action is a necessary part of the actual sufficient set of antecedent conditions for Big Box's plan, just as each voter is in the previous example. If she did not purchase, there would have been a different sufficient set of causes instead. Thus, Carla's purchase can be said to be part of the cause of, or make a causal contribution to, Big Box's wrongdoing.

Another way of understanding why both a rock thrower and Carla count as causal contributors to an overdetermined outcome is with the notion of modal security, which is how Lepora and Goodin understand such cases. They differentiate causal "essentiality" from "potential essentiality." An act is essential when it is a necessary condition for an outcome "in every suitably nearby possible world" or when it is an "individual difference-maker."¹⁴ An act is potentially essential if it could be a necessary condition for an outcome along "some (but not all) possible paths" by which the outcome might occur.¹⁵ In other words, at a time antecedent to the outcome, there "is some suitably nearby possible world in which the act will individually make a difference," even if it turns out not to do so.¹⁶

13 Of course, we might say that the set of *A*, *B*, and *C* voting, plus *E* kicking a rock, would have also been sufficient for the measure passing, and *E* is a necessary element of that set. But we do not think *E* is part of the cause of the measure passing. In response, when we are looking for the set of causes of an outcome, we should focus on the sorts of actions that are of a type that would normally be either necessary or sufficient for that outcome. Kicking a rock is usually itself neither necessary nor sufficient for a measure based on voting to pass. We should therefore look to those who voted as a cause. Still, I am not here defending the NESS account as the correct or best account of causation. Rather, I am arguing that it tracks moral intuitions in both the rock-throwing and *Big Box* cases.

14 Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*, 61–64.

15 Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*, 64.

16 Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*, 64.

Overdetermination causes like that of the rock throwers represent potential essentiality. Each rock throw is potentially essential to the death of Chen because there is a not-too-distant possible world where it is true of any given rock thrower that his throw hits, along with nine others, while all the rest miss, so that his rock becomes the threshold-crossing rock. Prospectively, then, each rock throw provides a sort of modal security to the passing of the relevant threshold. It is therefore fair to say that each rock throw makes a relevant causal contribution to Chen's death. Similarly, there is a not-too-distant possible world where 9,999 people have also, unbeknownst to Carla, decided not to buy the dress, such that her choice not to buy the dress turns out to make a difference to Big Box's wrongdoing.

I think we can therefore conclude that, appearances to the contrary, Lepora and Goodin's definition *does* find Carla to be morally complicit even though purchasing the dress will make no difference to Big Box's wrongdoing. First, Carla's act was voluntary. She consciously chose to buy the dress. Second, Carla meets their basic epistemic condition, because she knew or should have known that Big Box was engaged in wrongdoing. After all, looking up the Boycott Big Box website is not too epistemically taxing. Or, alternatively, if we think Carla's epistemic position is such that she should not have known that Big Box was engaged in wrongdoing, we might conclude that she is morally complicit but not morally responsible for being so.¹⁷ Either way, third, and importantly, Carla's purchase makes a causal contribution to Big Box's wrongdoing.¹⁸ Just

17 For example, suppose Carla buys her dress from the FairClothing website, which sources fair-trade dresses, and in so doing she reasonably believes that she is not contributing to labor exploitation. In fact, FairClothing is a scam and buys dresses from Big Box and sells them for twice the price to suckers like Carla. Intuitively, it does not seem as if Carla is complicit, even though her purchase does make a causal contribution to Big Box's labor exploitation. We can see that in this case it is the epistemic element that seems to make a difference to complicity. If Carla learns about this and continues to buy dresses from FairClothing, only then does she become complicit in what it does, even though her causal contribution is still the same.

18 This may be thought to lead to counterintuitive implications. First, if Carla buys an *ethically sourced* product from Big Box, this may also make a causal contribution to the wrongful parts of its plans and activities, even though her purchase was not wrongfully produced. Yet, we may have the intuition that Carla is not complicit with its wrongdoing because she causally contributed to the ethically appropriate part of its activities. Second, and similarly, to avoid complicity with Big Box, it seems like Carla should boycott the company completely, thereby ensuring that she does not make a causal contribution to the wrongful part of its plans and actions. But these implications of the notion of complicity as causal contribution are not as counterintuitive as they might seem. Take another case where an agent is engaged in both morally blameworthy and praiseworthy actions. Let us say a government is engaged in ethnic cleansing in one part of the country even as they also provide excellent support for the arts. An agency that provides funding for the arts donates

how morally complicit Carla is, and if and why her doing so is wrong, is a topic I turn to later in the paper. But this discussion helps us see how the most basic causal element of Lepora and Goodin's conception of complicity is met even in overdetermination cases.

3. COMPLICITY AS CAUSAL CONTRIBUTION VS. COMPLICITY AS JOINING IN

The reason that Carla's purchase makes her complicit with Big Box's wrongdoing is that Carla knows Big Box is engaged in wrongdoing and her purchase makes a causal contribution to its actions. Other theorists, however, have argued that the reason Carla is complicit even though her purchase does not make a difference is because, by making the purchase, she joins in or participates with the wrongdoing that Big Box, or other customers, are doing.¹⁹ While there is a sense in which I think this is correct, theorists should be careful to remain focused on the element of knowingly making a causal contribution as opposed to any more robust notion of joint or group action. This is because it seems unlikely that most people make a purchase as a way of joining in a group action whose consequences they thereby become responsible for.

One can see the promise of a joint- or group-action approach to understanding Carla's complicity, but it is important to recognize that there is a difference between an aggregate set of uncoordinated individual actions and a joint or group action. For example, someone might want to go to Chicago and decide to buy a train ticket and board and ride the train to get there. But this is different than three people deciding to go to Chicago via train together. Even so, there is debate about how to understand joint or group action. We might think that it requires relatively robust conditions, such as mutual knowledge of each other, mutual responsiveness to each other's actions, and each individual having the intention that the group act together. I do not delve into this debate here but focus on Christopher Kutz's account of joint action to test the claim that Carla joins in with a group action via her purchase. This is because his account identifies minimal conditions for joint action, but also because it is

money to the government specifically earmarked for the arts, even as that agency knows the government is engaged in ethnic cleansing. I think it makes sense to say that the agency is complicit with the government's wrongful action and that support for struggling artists is not a sufficient good to justify its complicity. This could be because donating money to the government for the arts adds a sort of legitimacy to its actions as a whole and this may also be understood in terms of making a causal contribution to the wrongful parts of its actions.

19 Driver, "Individual Consumption and Moral Complicity"; Martin, "Factory Farming and Consumer Complicity"; McPherson, "Why I Am a Vegan (and You Should Be One Too)" and "The Ethical Basis for Veganism"; Schwartz, *Consuming Choices*.

often appealed to in discussions of complicity.²⁰ The element of his account that is initially attractive is his claim that those who participate in a joint or group action can become morally responsible for the consequences of that action even if their joining in makes no difference.

Kutz argues that a set of individuals is engaged in a joint action when each individual (i) has a sufficiently overlapping conception of a shared goal, *G*, and (ii) each performs a voluntary action that aims to contribute a part toward the realization of *G*.²¹ On this view, a group of individuals is taking the train to Chicago together when each of them shares a sufficiently overlapping conception of their goal and each performs an action toward the realization of that goal—say, one looks up the schedule and tells the others, another buys the tickets, and someone else drives them to the station. Or, picking up an example from Kutz, the flight crews who dropped bombs on the city of Dresden in World War II are engaged in a joint action because each has an overlapping conception of *G* (drop bombs on Dresden) and each performs acts toward the realization of *G* (loading bombs, taking off, dropping bombs, etc.).

An individual joins in with the joint action in virtue of their conception of the goal and the aim of their attendant actions. Moreover, each individual who joins in with the group action shares some moral responsibility for the outcomes of that action, even if those outcomes were overdetermined. That is, let us say that whether or not an individual participates in the bombing, the effects would be just as bad. Still, if an individual does join in, he becomes morally responsible for those bad effects, even though he made no difference to them. This is because of how he structures his will; he still shared the goal and joined in with others. Finally, it is important to note that someone can join in with a group action without intending or wanting *G* to be accomplished. For example, someone might be strongly against the bombing but join in because of a threat of dishonorable discharge. All that is needed is that he shares an overlapping conception of *G* with those also engaged in the joint action and voluntarily performs actions that aim to contribute to the achievement of *G*. “Voluntarily” here means meeting basic conditions like consciousness and control of one’s actions.

Returning to the consumer cases at hand, our first possibility is that, by making a purchase, Carla participates in a joint action *with Big Box itself*. It is true that Big Box employees are engaged in a joint action, but becoming a

20 Nefsky, “Fairness, Participation, and the Real Problem of Collective Harm,” 110.

21 Kutz, *Complicity*, 74.

customer of Big Box does not seem to meet the relevant conditions.²² By purchasing, does Carla join in with the group action of Big Box's employees? As David Schwartz explains, to think this we would have to understand Carla's purchase as an "act of intentional participation in a collective action that encompasses the production, marketing, distribution, and consumption of particular consumer products. The collective [would be] . . . thus extended beyond those employed to include those who purchase the output of the manufacturing operations. This intentional participation [would make] . . . the consumer complicit in . . . any blameworthy (or praiseworthy) actions of that collective."²³

In fact, this is just how Schwartz argues that we should think of Carla's purchase. Her act "is essential to the successful collective activity of garment manufacture, marketing, and sales; in fact, consumer participation is the primary motivation—and sole criterion of success—for the entire effort."²⁴ But as a customer it is unlikely that Carla shares the goal or aim that makes it such that the employees of the company are engaged in a joint action. Her aim in buying the dress is to have and enjoy the dress, not to arrange the production or sourcing of various products to sell them to consumers to create a profit. Moreover, she does not buy the dress as a way of contributing to the realization of that goal. Schwartz replies to this issue by suggesting that Carla does have a strong identification with the aim or goal of the company's joint action because she identifies as a consumer.²⁵ Yet, even if she does strongly identify with her role as a consumer, this is not sufficient to provide an overlapping goal with Big Box's employees such that she is engaged in a joint action with Big Box itself, which, as I have suggested, is about selling items to consumers with the goal of making a profit.

A second possibility is that Carla becomes complicit in Big Box's wrongdoing because she joins in a group action *with Big Box's other consumers*. According to Adrienne Martin, that consumer group is complicit in Big Box's wrongdoing

22 First, to count as employees, they need to sufficiently share the overarching goal of arranging the production or sourcing of various products and selling them to consumers to create profit. Second, each employee performs actions that aim to contribute a part toward the realization of some number of sub-goals that in turn aim to contribute a part toward the realization of Big Box's overarching goal. As individuals engaged in joint action, following Kutz's joint-action approach, each employee bears some moral responsibility for the foreseeable harm and wrongdoing that results from the pursuit of their shared goal, including the use of slaves to produce some of the products. Some individuals may bear greater moral responsibility depending on a range of epistemic, causal, and moral factors, but Kutz argues that all the employees will bear some moral responsibility for that outcome.

23 Schwartz, *Consuming Choices*, 74.

24 Schwartz, *Consuming Choices*, 82.

25 Schwartz, *Consuming Choices*, 83.

because it does make a difference to its production decisions. Martin follows this approach in her discussion of purchases of meat from industrialized farms. She acknowledges that no consumer makes a difference to these farms' wrongdoing, and so no individual is complicit as an "accomplice."²⁶ Yet, she argues that, by making a purchase, a customer joins in with the group of consumers who are also making that purchase, a group whose aim or function is to signal demand. That group aids and abets the wrong that industrialized farms do. The individual consumer is complicit with that complicity because she voluntarily joins in and becomes a member of the group that does make a difference.

Martin does not expressly state how they join in simply by making a purchase or what conditions someone must meet in order to count as joining in with what a group does together. But Martin seems to think that someone who joins in shares responsibility for the effects of what the group together causes, whether or not her participation makes any difference to that outcome. She states that "it is not a causal relation doing the moral lifting" in such cases, and that "what matters in such cases is *participation* but describing participation as causal doesn't get at the heart of what matters, morally speaking."²⁷

In the previous approach there was a group or joint action taking place (the actions of Big Box's employees), but here it is not clear that there is any group agency or joint action. Individuals engaged in a joint or group action must at least share an overlapping conception of a shared goal, but it is not clear that a set of consumers of a particular product will do so simply in virtue of the fact that they buy it. In reply, we may be able to say that each has the goal of buying something they need or wants. We might further suggest that this shows that they have an overlapping conception of a shared goal, perhaps something like Martin's suggestion that the group's shared goal is the fulfillment of consumer demand. But I think it is unlikely that Carla has other consumers in mind when she buys the dress, or that, when she buys the dress, she has in mind the goal of fulfilling consumer demand or contributing to the function of the market economy. Moreover, she likely does not buy the dress *as a way* of contributing to any of these putative shared goals; rather, she makes the purchase as a way of fulfilling her own needs or wants. Thus, it is not clear that Carla joined in with what other consumers were doing in any robust way.²⁸

26 Martin, "Factory Farming and Consumer Complicity," 205.

27 Martin, "Factory Farming and Consumer Complicity," 209.

28 Julia Driver also looks to Kutz's idea of intentional participation to address the "no difference" issue. Yet, Driver moves away from a view of complicity that focuses only on an agent's intentions and seems to recognize that there must be some sort of causal element for a purchase to count as participation. She says that an action that "*could never* make a causal contribution" would not count as a participatory act. Moreover, even though

My causal-contribution approach, however, supports the shared sense that by making a purchase Carla is “participating in” what Big Box does, but it does so in a more minimal sense. We can see this by relating my approach to Tristram McPherson’s understanding of complicity. On his view, Big Box is engaged in wrongdoing and has a plan to continue to do so that involves a “pattern of goals.”²⁹ The execution of that plan requires others playing various roles, including the role of customer. By making a purchase, Carla is “knowingly and voluntarily fulfilling a [key] role that needs to be fulfilled” for that wrongful plan “to work.”³⁰ She thereby becomes complicit with the plan. McPherson says it is “plausible” that doing so is wrong even if it does not at all help “the success of the plan.”³¹ McPherson’s account captures the intuitive sense that making a purchase is a form of participation in, or cooperation with, the actions and plans of a company, including its wrongful plans. By performing the action of purchasing, Carla is knowingly playing a role in the wrongdoing, even if she is not literally joining in a group action with the company.

My account supplements this by bringing out the causal element of Carla playing that role. That is, someone might wonder how exactly Carla counts as playing a role in the wrongful plan if whether she does so or not will have no effect on that plan. A joint-action account like Schwartz’s or Martin’s would allow us to point to Carla’s goals or aims in response, but I have argued that is not tenable. What else can we point to in order to explain why Carla counts as “filling a slot” in Big Box’s plan besides the causal relationship between her doing so and the plan itself? Moreover, if it really were true that Carla’s purchase not only has no actual effect on the plan, but *could never* have any effect, it is not clear why her purchase would count as “playing a role” or “participating.” Finally, by assumption, Big Box does not need Carla to play her role since there are already enough others who are doing so. We need the conception of causal contribution I presented above to explain why playing a role in a plan whose success is massively overdetermined still counts as making one morally complicit.

someone’s meat purchase might have no effect on meat production, to say that the purchase makes her a participant in the wrongdoing, the act of purchasing must be the sort of action “that can make causal contributions to similar outcomes.” My discussion of the way a purchase makes a causal contribution to wrongdoing, even if it makes no difference, extends this part of Driver’s discussion of participation complicity. Driver, “Individual Consumption and Moral Complicity” 72–73.

29 McPherson, “Why I Am a Vegan (and You Should Be One Too),” 83.

30 McPherson, “The Ethical Basis for Veganism,” 19.

31 McPherson, “The Ethical Basis for Veganism,” 20.

To conclude, recognizing that Lepora and Goodin's view of complicity as causal contribution maintains traction in overdetermination cases has several important benefits. First, it explains why Carla's purchase makes her complicit without relying on identifying a joint or group action or showing that Carla is joining in that action. In general, it is important to recognize that someone can be complicit with the wrongdoing of others even if she does not actually join in with what they do. Structuring one's will to join in may be morally worse, but one can be complicit simply by making a causal contribution. Second, if Carla's purchase really did make absolutely no causal contribution as some have mistakenly assumed, it would be difficult to see why it would make her complicit. Intuitively, one is complicit with another when one is "part of the story" of what another person does. How can one be part of that story if one makes absolutely no causal contribution to what they do, or if there is absolutely no chance that one's action might aid or help them?³² If the core notion of complicity involves aiding or abetting the wrongdoing of another, it seems like one cannot be complicit with wrongdoing if one's action (or omission) makes absolutely no causal contribution.³³

Finally, insofar as Carla meets the other epistemic conditions on Lepora and Goodin's definition of complicity—she should have known that her act would contribute to wrongdoing—my approach allows us to make sense of how Carla

32 Gardner, "Complicity and Causality."

33 In response, someone might point out the following case that suggests that one can be complicit even if one knows *ex ante* that there is no possibility for one's act to have an effect. Imagine a group of Nazis has a wrongful plan to work together and coordinate their actions in order to promote white supremacy online and get new adherents. One self-identified Nazi is reviled by all of the others, and what he posts is always ignored by all of the others and ineffective at getting new adherents. His posts therefore do not make any difference or make any causal contribution to the wrongdoing that the others do. Still, by making his posts, he seems to be complicit with the wrongdoing of the other Nazis because he is still knowingly trying to play a role or "fill a slot" in the plan. In response, first, I would say that what the reviled Nazi does is more akin to attempted complicity than actual complicity. He intends or hopes to make a causal contribution to the success of what the others do and shares their goal. Yet, his complicity is attempted because he fails to achieve that goal. Attempted complicity may itself be wrong, but it is not wrong because of the causal contribution it actually makes. Second, we should be weary of trying to load too much into the notion of complicity. As Lepora and Goodin point out, there are some ways of acting in relation to another's wrongdoing that are morally worse than mere complicity (e.g., helping to plan or joining in with that wrongdoing) and some that are morally less bad (e.g., simply being in the same room as a known wrongdoer). Lepora and Goodin's conception of complicity as causal contribution gives us an expansive notion of complicity but one that still has some limits. If an action that could *never* have any effect on wrongdoing is to count as making one complicit, this would expand the notion to even further cases and also make it hard to know what counts as complicity and what does not.

might still be thought to voluntarily “participate” in what Big Box does (even if she does not literally join in with them in doing it). Her purchase contributes money that enters Big Box’s revenue stream. That causal contribution distinguishes her even from someone who refuses to purchase but still retrieves a discarded dress from the dumpster behind Big Box. As Driver points out, if it really was the case that Carla’s action made absolutely no causal contribution to what Big Box does, then by purchasing the dress she could, like the dumpster diver, also claim to just be consuming “waste” from the system.³⁴ Intuitively, however, by making a purchase Carla is a “participant in wrong-doing” in a way that the dumpster diver is not.³⁵ The dumpster diver is not a “participant” because their action (most likely) does not make a causal contribution to Big Box’s wrongdoing.

To conclude, my approach applies the most intuitive definition of complicity and explains why Carla’s act makes her complicit. As we will see, however, this does not fully address the problem of individual causal inefficacy for consumer ethics. We will need to better understand the moral reasons there are to avoid complicity and whether they support the intuition that, just as Aisha should not buy a dress from Bob’s Dresses, Carla should not buy one from Big Box.

4. WHY IS IT WRONG TO BE COMPLICIT?

Let us assume that Lepora and Goodin’s epistemic and causal conditions for responsibility for an act of complicity are met in *Big Box*. Acts of complicity are morally wrong and there is a defeasible moral reason that one should not perform such acts (such acts are, in Lepora and Goodin’s words, “*pro tanto* wrong”).³⁶ But how wrong is it to be morally complicit? When is it wrong all things considered to be so? In this section, I describe the problem that the *Big Box* case poses for Lepora and Goodin’s answers to these questions. I then move on to discuss other moral reasons why we should try to avoid complicity in such cases. I argue that there are a number moral reasons to avoid complicity besides the reason to avoid making a causal contribution to the wrongdoing of others.

The issue arises when we recognize that, while Carla’s purchase can be said to make a causal contribution to wrongdoing, that contribution is likely much smaller than it may seem. It is a complex and difficult empirical question whether any market will have the relevant thresholds, and, if it does, whether

34 Driver, “Individual Consumption and Moral Complicity,” 76.

35 Driver, “Individual Consumption and Moral Complicity,” 76.

36 Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*, 97.

they are not offset by factors that greatly minimize the probability that any particular purchase will have an effect. For example, in some markets there will also be buffers that shield production decisions from sales. Mark Budolfson gives an imagined example of such a buffer. Say a producer has always produced twenty thousand shirts each month and has always sold between fourteen thousand and sixteen thousand shirts each month. If the producer would happen to sell eighteen thousand shirts one month, in response he would produce twenty-five thousand shirts the next month. So, there is a genuine tipping point in the relationship between sales and production; namely, between 17,999 and 18,000 sold. But that threshold has never once been reached. Let us say that both consumers and producers know this. If so, the probability of one more T-shirt purchase having an effect is far less than one in eighteen thousand, since there is an incredibly low expected probability of any more than sixteen thousand shirts being sold that month. As Budolfson says, “we can know enough about supply chains . . . to know that threshold effects are not sufficiently likely and are not of sufficient magnitude to drive the expected effect of consumption anywhere close to the average effect.”³⁷

If it is reasonable to believe that many markets have these sorts of buffers, it is reasonable to believe that the chance that an individual’s purchase will signal a shift in demand or have an effect on a producer’s plans is much less than the average probability and, in large markets, probably vanishingly small.³⁸ Moreover, Lepora and Goodin argue that the amount of causal contribution decreases as the number of people also contributing increases, and as the number of “chance and choice nodes yet to come in the causal chain before the planned wrongdoing” increases.³⁹ Despite these problems, even if the causal contribution Carla’s purchase makes is very small, it still counts as a causal contribution to Big Box’s wrongdoing. She is therefore still complicit. But how morally wrong is it to be only a little bit complicit?

For Lepora and Goodin, complicit acts are a moral issue because of their consequences: they causally contribute to the success, extent, or severity of the harm or wrongdoing that others do. When such contributions are made voluntarily and knowingly, agents become morally responsible for their complicit contribution. They assess the wrongness and blameworthiness of an act of complicity in terms of both the moral badness of the principal wrongdoing

37 Budolfson, “The Inefficacy Objection to Consequentialism and the Problem with the Expected Consequences Response,” 1717.

38 Budolfson, “The Inefficacy Objection to Consequentialism and the Problem with the Expected Consequences Response”; and McPherson, “Why I Am a Vegan (and You Should Be One Too)” and “The Ethical Basis for Veganism.”

39 Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*, 67–68.

and the causal contribution the act makes to that principal wrongdoing. They argue that these two elements interact to shape wrongness and blameworthiness. Specifically, they say that we should multiply them together, allowing the amount of causal contribution to be a “discount factor” on the moral badness.⁴⁰ Holding the moral badness of the principal wrongdoing fixed, they put moral wrongness in a direct, linear relationship with the amount of causal contribution made by the complicit agent.

I also think that the amount of causal contribution an act of complicity makes is relevant to our moral judgments about complicit acts. Making a large causal contribution does seem to make an act of complicity morally worse. Also, moral complicity seems to be a scalar concept since we talk about some people being more complicit than others.⁴¹ For example, let us say that a government permits Big Box to utilize human slaves. We might think what that government does makes them more complicit with Big Box, and is morally worse, than what Carla does. Assuming no complicit agent intends the wrongdoing of the principal agent, this way of talking seems to be tracking how much of a causal contribution someone makes.

Yet, we can see that Lepora and Goodin’s normative analysis of complicity purely in terms of its morally relevant consequences may not help us to explain why Carla’s dress purchase is wrong and something she should not do. As we have seen, her causal contribution is very small. If the only reason complicity is wrong is because of the consequences it has for the harm or wrongdoing done by others, then her purchase of the dress may not ever rise to the level of a moral wrong. The incredibly small causal contribution would serve as a strong discount factor on the moral badness of the principal agent’s act, leading to the act being only a little bit wrong.

On the other hand, the use of slavery in the production of dresses is an egregious moral wrong, so multiplying Lepora and Goodin’s two factors together does increase the *pro tanto* moral reason for her to avoid complicity beyond an infinitesimal weight. That is, it does seem morally worse to make a very small causal contribution to those engaging in human slavery than it is to, say, help someone cheat on a physics test. The issue is that, even in this case, a very small causal contribution to an egregious moral wrong still seems not *that* wrong, as the weight of its moral reason remains very small, at least on Lepora and

40 Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*, 111–12.

41 This is another reason the conception of complicity as playing a role in another’s wrongful plan needs to be supplemented with an understanding of complicity as causal contribution. We think that playing some roles will make one more complicit than playing other roles. Leaving aside the issue of intending the wrongdoing, what could this be tracking except how much of a causal contribution one makes?

Goodin's understanding. Moreover, if making a very small causal contribution to the death or serious harm to others was very wrong, we may find many everyday activities to be morally wrong, and perhaps impermissible all things considered. For example, when I turn on my gas oven, I create a very small risk of death to others. Although the outcome could be death for others (a very morally bad result), it is not clear that it is wrong to turn on my oven, because the risk I create is very small.

In reply, we might say that even though Carla's contribution is very small, that contribution still makes her morally complicit, is a contribution to an egregious moral wrong, and, thus, should be thought of as being wrong. It is simply, *pro tanto*, not something she should do. The issue with this response is that it is not clear that being a little bit complicit with an egregious moral wrong will often be all-things-considered wrong. The problem is that the moral reason against being very minimally complicit will still be weak and may often be outweighed by any of Carla's morally relevant reasons for making the purchase, even in cases where we have the intuition that she should not buy the dress.

To reflect on this further, let us assume that Carla could go on the FairClothing website and order a dress that was produced by well-treated workers. In a first example, let us also assume the dress was just as nice and the same price. In that case, there do not seem to be any morally relevant reasons for her to buy the slave-made dress from Big Box. Morally, all things considered it would be wrong for her to do so. In a second example, let us assume that the FairClothing dress is three times the price, so things are not equal. Carla is lower income and uses that income to meet her family's needs. She is buying the dress for her daughter's first day at school. Paying three times the price on FairClothing would put a morally relevant burden on her and her family, though in a sense they could afford it. We have the weight of a financial burden to a family on a limited budget weighed against a very small causal contribution to human slavery. In this case, we might think that, all things considered, it is not wrong for Carla to buy the dress. Buying the dress is not something Carla morally should not do.

In a third example, let us say that if Carla buys the dress from FairClothing as opposed to Big Box, the only burden on her is paying three times the price but she could reasonably afford to pay it. Buying the FairClothing dress would leave her less money to spend on other things or lead to a loss of personal enjoyment. Most of us think moral reasons are weightier than personal, nonmoral reasons, even if we do not think that moral reasons have absolute lexical priority over personal, nonmoral ones. We might think that Carla's moral reason not to be infinitesimally complicit outweighs the personal, nonmoral burden of giving up a thing she might like better or paying more than otherwise. In that case, despite Lepora and Goodin's causal discount factor on the moral

wrongness of complicity, it would be wrong all things considered for Carla to purchase the dress if the cost of refusing to do so were only reasonable personal burdens. This would explain why, in this example, Carla morally should not buy the dress because doing so would make her wrongfully complicit despite her minimal causal contribution. This supports intuitive judgments about Carla's moral complicity.

On the other hand, someone might object that even these reasonable personal burdens outweigh the moral wrongness of making a very small causal contribution to an egregious moral wrong. From the perspective of morality, Carla's happiness and personal projects matter. Does morality require her to give up a bit of personal happiness to avoid making a tiny causal contribution to wrongdoing that she does not intend and that others do? While the burden to Carla of buying the FairClothing dress is small, that is a real burden to her and may seem weightier than the burden that buying the Big Box dress imposes on another, which is an infinitesimal causal contribution to wrongdoing or harm to them. If it is morally wrong not to bear even relatively small personal burdens to avoid making infinitesimal causal contributions even to serious harms or wrongdoing, we may find ourselves overburdened with moral wrongs.

I am not sure if these worries are sufficient to undermine the ability of Lepora and Goodin's normative conception of complicity to explain why it would be wrong and morally blameworthy all things considered if Carla were to buy the dress in the third example. We often still appeal to the notion of complicity even when we realize that an act makes very little causal contribution to harm or wrong, and in so doing what we seem to be trying to emphasize is not how much we are contributing to a harm or wrong, but that continuing to make that contribution once we believe or should have believed that harm is taking place says something about ourselves, what we choose to participate in, and our relationship to those harmed or wronged. I therefore think it is valuable to explore the moral reasons that might explain why we should try to avoid intentional acts of moral complicity, even if we accept Lepora and Goodin's claim that the amount of causal contribution serves as a discount factor on moral wrongness. I will suggest that there are two sets of moral reasons an agent might have to avoid knowingly contributing to the wrongs that others do: self-regarding and other-regarding.

Agents have a self-regarding moral reason to avoid being knowingly complicit in the wrongdoing that others do when that wrongdoing runs counter to their moral values and commitments. For example, Kwame Appiah asks why some think that a particular organization morally should divest from companies that are engaged in wrongdoing even if that divestment will have little to no influence. He suggests that the reason for some is the desire to avoid the moral

taint of having dirty hands: "We are associated, through our ownership of the shares, with a wicked system; we play a part in it. Our holding of the shares taints us."⁴² He says that if we are to make any sense of a moral requirement to avoid moral taint, it must be in terms of a tension between one's moral identity and what one chooses to be associated with. This suggests that this taint can undermine moral integrity.⁴³

Similarly, Marina Oshana argues that the reason an agent should avoid being associated or complicit with wrongdoing and wrongdoers is that she should aim to live authentically with respect to her commitments and self-understanding.⁴⁴ If we follow this line of thought, we can say that if Carla has a fundamental belief that slavery is an egregious moral wrong (as she should), choosing to continue to be complicit with Big Box undermines her personal integrity and authenticity. Moreover, failing to live with personal integrity and authenticity may make Carla worse off in the long run. It would be rational for her to give up the enjoyment of buying the dress and pay more for the fair-trade dress in order to promote her own well-being.

Avoiding being complicit with wrongdoers can also help one develop a virtuous moral character. Discussing someone who purchases meat, Julia Driver emphasizes that what someone decides to participate in can display something about their character. First, Driver suggests that from a virtue-consequentialist perspective, if individuals develop the character trait of knowingly making small contributions to others' wrongdoing, this may systematically produce bad overall effects.⁴⁵ Carla may become more indifferent to wrongdoing in general and so may end up being complicit even in situations where she makes a relatively large causal contribution to the wrongdoing of others. Put another way, a world of perfect Carlas who only make small causal contributions to the wrongdoing of others is morally worse than one in which people always refuse to buy slave-made products. Therefore, Carla should not make a habit of knowing complicity with the wrongdoing of others, however small. Second, Driver also suggests that on a virtue-intrinsic approach the character trait of knowing complicity with wrongdoers means that one has an orientation toward good and bad that is itself intrinsically bad. She explains that "virtue involves having the right kind of orientation or attitude toward good and evil," and complicity with wrongdoing may be one such improper orientation.⁴⁶

42 Appiah, "Racism and Moral Pollution," 190.

43 Appiah, "Racism and Moral Pollution," 193.

44 Oshana, "Moral Taint," 368.

45 Driver, "Individual Consumption and Moral Complicity," 76.

46 Driver, "Individual Consumption and Moral Complicity," 76–77.

Yet, there seems to be more involved in avoiding complicity than just a moral concern about integrity, authenticity, and moral character. By contributing to another's wrongdoing one becomes related to the victims of the wrongdoing. While one might care very deeply about their plight, the decision to knowingly contribute can express moral disrespect and disregard. Since all persons are moral equals, moral agents owe each other forms of treatment (actions) and regard (attitudes) that instantiate and express equal respect and mutual recognition.

There are two elements to consider regarding an agent's attitude toward others. The first concerns the attitudes or forms of regard themselves. The second concerns how the agent's actions express those attitudes within the relationship. This is the "meaning" of those actions for others or the significance others have reason to assign them.⁴⁷ Carla should have an attitude of serious moral regard and concern for the plight of the slaves whom Big Box sourced to produce dresses. Choosing to remain complicit with Big Box's wrongdoing even once she reasonably believes, or should reasonably believe, that they are engaged in wrongdoing is disrespectful toward the slaves and expresses a level of disregard for the egregious wrong that is being done to them.

To see how the element of moral disrespect and disregard relates to an act of knowing complicity, we can think about a case where the agent is strongly complicit because the causal contribution is relatively large. For example, Bahani works at the only knife shop in town. Ryder comes in to buy a knife and is acting and speaking in a way such that Bahani reasonably believes that Ryder is going to use the knife to go on a stabbing spree. If Bahani refuses to sell the knife, it will be much more difficult for Ryder to get one. While Bahani does not commit the stabbings, he becomes strongly complicit with them because his action is a large causal contributor (an almost necessary condition) for Ryder's wrongdoing. Given this, part of why Bahani's act is wrong is that it is causally responsible for a large part of the wrongful harm that Ryder does. Not only does it make him strongly complicit with Ryder's actions, but it also seems to "cause harm," even though it does so by helping Ryder cause it. But selling the knife is also wrong because the voluntary decision to still sell the knife despite what Bahani should have believed was disrespectful toward Ryder's potential victims. Imagine one of the victims meeting Bahani after the incident. Bahani may say that he really cared about the plight of Ryder's potential victims and was strongly against Ryder's plan. All of that may be true, yet he still decided to become complicit, which suggests that he did not care as much as he might have.

In this case, Bahani's act makes a relatively substantial causal contribution to Ryder's wrongdoing. His act causes morally relevant harm, makes him

47 Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, 54.

complicit with Ryder's wrongdoing, and expresses disrespect and disregard for Ryder's potential victims. Returning to Carla, since her causal contribution is infinitesimal, she is only minimally complicit, and she is only very minimally causally responsible for the harm or wrong done to the slaves. Still, like Bahani, Carla voluntarily and knowingly chose to remain complicit in Big Box's wrongdoing when she could have avoided it at a reasonable cost to herself. While we lose the idea that her complicity causes harm, or makes her strongly complicit, her choice may still express disrespect and disregard for the plight of the slaves.

I do not think that acting in ways that may express disrespect and disregard in such cases rises to the level of a clear moral wrong. Rather, I think it is better to understand it as a form of offense.⁴⁸ The moral reason to avoid even small amounts of complicity with wrongdoers is a "negative" mirror image of "positive" supererogatory moral reasons that has to do with legitimate expectations beyond the realm of rights and duties.⁴⁹ Performing actions that develop and express the attitude of moral respect and regard for the plight of others are just such moral expectations.

There are at least two issues with the claim that Carla's action is disrespectful to those wronged. First, there is the issue of hidden actions. Let us say that Carla buys the dress but does not tell anyone and no one ever finds out, least of all the slaves far away who made it. Why should we think that Carla's action "expresses disrespect" if the action never actually expresses anything to anyone? In reply, it does seem like an act can be disrespectful even if no one is actually disrespected by it. Bahani's action of selling the knife to Ryder given his beliefs about Ryder's plans suggests that Bahani fails to take into sufficient account the plight of potential victims. This is the case even if Ryder decides not to use the knife to harm others.

The second issue is more difficult. Let us say that Carla does care deeply about the plight of the slaves and has joined Students against Sweatshops. Still, she buys the dress because she realizes doing so does not cause harm and makes her only infinitesimally complicit with their situation. But she also does many other things that express moral respect and regard for those enslaved. Why then would the purchase express moral disregard for their plight? To reply to this issue, we only need recognize that having and expressing moral respect and regard for others is a scalar notion. We could often have greater regard for the plight of others, and often perform further actions that express our care

48 Mellema, *Complicity and Moral Accountability*, 88–89.

49 Elizabeth Harman calls these "morally permissible moral mistakes." She argues that buying meat makes one part of the joint cause of the harms and wrongs of meat production. Even if one's causal contribution is infinitesimal, doing so is a morally permissible moral mistake ("Eating Meat as a Morally Permissible Moral Mistake").

and concern. In this situation, Carla has great moral respect and regard for the plight of those wronged by Big Box that she expresses in many of her actions. Nonetheless, she could express a little bit more by avoiding actions that make her even infinitesimally complicit with those engaged in the wrongdoing she so deeply cares about.⁵⁰

5. CONCLUSION

In the first part of this paper, I argued that one can become complicit with the wrongdoing that others do even if one's action does not make a difference to that wrongdoing. All that is needed is that one's act makes a causal contribution to what they do. Moreover, even if that causal contribution is very small, one still counts as complicit. In such situations, I have argued that there is a set of moral reasons to avoid complicity that joins with the moral reason to avoid making a causal contribution to the wrongdoing of others. Some are self-regarding reasons involving having integrity, authenticity, and moral character, while some are other-regarding reasons involving having and expressing attitudes of moral regard and respect for those harmed or wronged. These moral reasons join with the fundamental moral reason to avoid complicity that I argued for above. Carla has a moral reason to avoid complicity at a reasonable cost to herself. Even a very small causal contribution makes her morally complicit, implicating her in the story of the harm and wrongdoing that others do. Voluntarily choosing to continue to be complicit once she reasonably believes, or should reasonably believe, that she is implicated, when she could choose not to be complicit at a reasonable cost to herself, means she plays a role in the wrongdoing that others do. This fact has a moral valence that may outweigh any personal, nonmoral reasons she has to remain complicit.

That said, whether Carla's purchase is all-things-considered wrong because it makes her complicit will continue to depend on her other morally relevant reasons. Let us say that Carla could take the money she saves from purchasing the cheaper, slave-made dress and donate it to effective charities that make a

50 Take a related example. Felix is strongly against and cares deeply about the injustice faced by a particular social group. A political representative who has passed laws that are unjust toward that social group is visiting Felix's town for a parade and festival. Despite his beliefs and attitudes, Felix decides to attend the parade and festival. There are flags, food, and music, and it is a bit of fun. Later, Felix tells his friend who is a member of the relevant social group about his attendance. The friend is hurt by what Felix did and says, "If you cared so much about us, why did you go and support her?" Felix replies, "I am strongly against what she has done, but it was just a bit of harmless fun." Even so, it seems justifiable for the friend to reply, "I know you care about our situation, but you could have shown you care even more by not attending the parade."

direct causal contribution to minimizing suffering and wrongdoing. We might think in that case, even though she has a set of moral reasons to avoid moral complicity, she has a countervailing moral reason to continue to be complicit. Thus, buying the dress may not be all-things-considered wrong to do. Even so, it would certainly be morally better to donate to effective charities even while she minimizes her knowing complicity with the wrongdoing she cares deeply about.

Theorists have found it difficult to explain why consumers morally should not purchase from companies that are engaged in wrongdoing in situations where refusing to purchase would seem to make no difference to the success, extent, or severity of the companies' wrongdoing. I have shown how a complicity-based approach can help. We must recognize that a consumer becomes complicit not because they join in with a group action that is doing wrong, but because a purchase makes a causal contribution to the wrong that the company does, even if it is very small. The choice to knowingly make that contribution implicates the agent in the wrongdoing and that choice has moral relevance in relation to self- and other-regarding moral reasons.⁵¹

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