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Philosophical Obstacles to Shared Responsibility for Climate Change

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Introduction

Climate change is a problem of unprecedented proportion and urgency and, as such, it presents the human race with unprecedented ethical challenges.¹ In light of the enormity of the potential harm and the limited time frame for establishing successful coordinated global efforts to avert – or perhaps at best mitigate – this harm, the human community needs to adopt new cultural norms, social expectations, and practices of accountability capable of motivating and sustaining the significant and wide-spread changes in habits of living required to address this problem.

¹ In what follows I take it that climate change exists, that it is the result of human activity, and that it is already well underway. According to the fourth report of the International Panel on Climate Change, “Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising average sea level” (IPCC: AR4 WG1).

Motivating significant changes in lifestyle no doubt requires forming new, or retrieving long existing, habits of thinking about our relationship to the natural environment capable of replacing the purely instrumental and amoral conceptions of this relationship upon which culturally dominant attitudes toward consumption are currently founded. In the encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI restates, in perhaps the most forceful terms of any sitting pope, the position of the Catholic Church regarding our relationship of responsibility to the natural environment. A “responsible stewardship over nature” (2009a: 50), Benedict writes, entails rejecting conceptions of this relationship that aim at

total technical domination over nature, because the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a “grammar” which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation (2009a: 48).²

In light of the now familiar charge against the Judeo-Christian tradition’s historical emphasis on human “dominion” over nature as fundamentally exploitative,³ and the well publicized anti-environmentalism of various Christian Fundamentalist groups in the United States, Benedict’s efforts to remind Catholics of the dangers of such “distorted notions” (2009a: 48) of the call to stewardship is both timely and important. Likewise, by explicitly identifying the “problems associated with such realities as climate change” as part of “a growing crisis which it would be irresponsible not to take seriously” (2009b: 4), Benedict puts to rest any misconceptions of the Catholic Church as a party to the denial of climate change. Such clarifications are essential to assuaging misperceptions on the part of believers and non-believers about the Catholic Church’s position on the ecological crises that face us.

Equally, if not more important, than these clarifications, however, is Benedict’s insistence that responsibility for the environment must be conceived through the lens of solidarity, which is “first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone” (2009a: 38). By contextualizing responsibility for global environmental problems in this way, Benedict rightly recognizes that responsibility for such problems cannot be made intelligible apart from a robust sense of shared responsibility, which “embraces time and space” (2009b: 8).

Climate change is a collective problem in two distinct, but related ways. First, its effects constitute a vast collective harm, which is the cumulative result of millions of individual actions, smeared out across generations and the globe, each of which seems causally negligible relative to the cumulative whole. Second, climate change is a collective problem in the sense that its solution requires collective action on the part of individuals and nations. The sheer amount of carbon emissions that must be reduced if we are to avoid the most catastrophic effects of climate change is such that radical reductions on the part of a single nation would not succeed in averting global disaster. Moreover, the interdependence of the global market and trade being what it is, success in reducing carbon emissions to a

² The scope of moral duties entailed in responsible stewardship is not, of course, limited to the mitigation of climate change. For the purposes of this paper, however, I shall take climate change as the central environmental problem of focus.

³ Though not unique to him alone, this criticism was most famously argued by Lynn White Jr.

sustainable level will require large-scale international cooperation. Simply put, if humanity is to survive this threat, we have to work together.

Nevertheless, it is a striking and unfortunate feature of our current moral attitudes toward the realities of climate change that even where individuals recognize – for religious reasons or otherwise – the problem as a moral one requiring them to do “their part,” they remain hesitant to hold other members of society similarly accountable. Earlier I mentioned that significant changes in habits of living would require wide spread social and cultural endorsement of new practices of accountability. This is because one of the primary ways that persons come to understand and endorse shared moral norms is through the practices of both holding and being held accountable. Widespread change in our social attitudes and action is not, therefore, likely to come about as long as individual members of society conceive themselves as lacking the standing to hold each other accountable for their mutual contribution to the problem of climate change.

The general hesitancy to hold each other so accountable is largely due to the significant conceptual difficulties entailed in making sense of personal responsibility for climate change. Despite a vague sense that *we* are responsible, it remains difficult to make intelligible the moral accountability of any particular *I*. The conception of responsibility characteristic of our modern culture presupposes, for reasons I shall unpack below, “that harms and their causes are individual, that they can be readily identified, and that they are local in space and time” (Jameison: 148). Because this view of individual responsibility tends to preclude judgments of complicitous accountability, it threatens to render any sense of moral responsibility for climate change unintelligible.

Such confusion about how to ascribe responsibility for climate change undermines the confidence of believers and non-believers alike to hold each other accountable for this problem. Without a reinterpretation of certain individualistic conceptions of responsibility and agency, what responsible stewardship requires individual believers to do in response to climate change will remain constrained by such confusions. Likewise, efforts to secure duties to the natural environment along non-theological lines – by extending the realm of moral considerability – will encounter these same difficulties. It is the task of the Church, as taken on by Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate*, to help believers retrieve a coherent sense of their responsibility for the environment from the tradition to which they belong. If it is to motivate the kind of coordinated action needed to address environmental problems, however, recognition of our shared moral responsibility for climate change cannot simply be internal to members of the Church. Thus an analogous effort to clarify the nature of our responsibility for climate change in purely philosophical terms is also called for.

My purpose in what follows is twofold: First, I wish to draw attention to the limits a certain set of seemingly commonsense moral principles place on our everyday non-philosophical understanding of moral responsibility. Where such limits remain merely implicit in our understanding of our own moral responses, we are likely to find ourselves unwittingly trapped in a conflict between those ordinary moral intuitions that tend to suppress our sense of moral responsibility for climate change and those that tend to embrace it. My second aim is to provide a preliminary explanation for how we might legitimately

conceive our personal responsibilities with respect to climate change in a way that makes inelminable reference to our capacity for joint participation in collective action.

Evaluative Solipsism and the Controversial Concept of Collective Responsibility

It will help to begin with a few comments about the term “responsibility.” One sense of responsibility has to do with causation. To say “some entity, X, is responsible for some occurrence, O” is to say that X had some role in bringing O about. In addition to pinning some occurrence on someone or some thing, however, ascriptions of responsibility also often bear the meaning of “accountability” or “liability to answer” for that occurrence (French: 140). Thus responsibility also sometimes refers to “a set of internal psychological competencies a person must have in order to be answerable for the harm” (Kutz: 18). Moreover, where holding X responsible is a matter of holding X accountable, ascriptions of responsibility presuppose responsibility relationships with other agents and can entail both backward- and forward-looking claims about one’s obligations or duties toward others.⁴ In much of what follows, I take it for granted that persons have a *prima facie* moral duty not to perform acts that cause harm to others when such harm can be avoided. I also assume that the future death, thirst, hunger, and violence that will be the result of climate change together constitute a significant harm, much of which can be avoided if we choose to act differently now. My concern in this paper is not to defend the normative authority of the harm principle as such, but to draw attention to the difficulties entailed in making sense of its application to the particular problem of climate change.

The last set of preliminaries I want to address concern how references to individual, collective, shared, and personal responsibility are to be understood. As I shall use them here, the first three serve to identify the subject of responsibility as, respectively, an individual moral agent, an irreducible collective, or an aggregate of individuals whose actions (or inactions) jointly result in a harm. “When a group is collectively responsible for a harm, the group as such is responsible; but this does not necessarily mean that all, or even any, of the members are individually responsible for the harm” (May 1992: 38). Like collective responsibility, ascriptions of shared responsibility focus on how the actions or attitudes of a group jointly result in a given harm and, as such, “on the way each of us interacts with others, rather than on the individual person as an isolated agent” (May 1992: 38). Unlike collective responsibility, however, ascriptions of shared responsibility do not hold the group as such responsible, but ascribe partial responsibility to persons on the basis of their joint participation in some harm. Because shared responsibility concerns only the aggregated responsibility of members of a group, it does not require the group in question to have a clear decision-making structure. I shall use the term personal responsibility to refer to the first-person recognition that one is accountable for some harm. Although such recognition is always the recognition of some individual person, it need not entail recognizing oneself to be fully individually responsible for the harm in question. Ultimately, I shall argue that the moral responsibility ordinary persons bear for climate change is to be properly understood as

⁴ Although this sense of responsibility is often parasitic on and incorporates the other senses of responsibility listed, I do not wish to reject the possibility that persons might be legitimately accountable for some harm independent of causality or conduct, as, for instance, in certain cases involving judgments about character.

neither fully individual, nor collective, but as a species of shared responsibility.⁵ In order to understand the obstacles to making sense of shared responsibility for climate change, however, it will help to begin by looking at the sorts of reasons frequently given for rejecting the concept of collective responsibility.

We often speak in ways that seem to betray no worries about assigning fault and blame to groups. Everyday discourse abounds with claims about the moral blameworthiness of AIG for its role in the financial disaster, British Petroleum for the oil spill in the Gulf, Greece for its role in the economic crisis, and developed nations for their disproportionate contribution to climate change. Nevertheless, some philosophers maintain that unless such claims are understood as merely rhetorical or expedient ways of stating claims about the moral responsibility of individuals, they involve a misuse of the term ‘moral responsibility’.

For example, H. D. Lewis argues that moral responsibility must belong essentially to the individual because the very idea of collective responsibility conflicts with our ordinary intuitions regarding moral praise and blame. He writes,

I should like to insist that the belief in “individual,” as against any form of “collective” responsibility is quite fundamental to our ordinary ethical attitudes.

For if we believe that responsibility is literally shared, it becomes very hard to maintain that there are any properly moral distinctions to be drawn between one course of action and another. All will be equally good, or equally evil, as the case may be. For we shall be directly implicated in one another’s actions, and the praise or blame for them must fall upon us all without discrimination (17).

According to Lewis, any ascription of collective moral responsibility marks a dangerous return to the “undiscriminating ethic of the tribe” (30) or mere guilt by association. He maintains that the proper basis for discriminating between the moral worth of actions must be limited to that which an individual subject intentionally brings about through her own agency. This is because “the nature of properly moral value seems to be such that it would be very strange to ascribe it to features of our conduct which we do not fully understand and bring within our control” (21). Insofar as Benedict’s appeal to duties of solidarity invokes the idea of literally shared responsibility “on the part of everyone with regard to everyone” (2009a: 38), according to Lewis, it renders unintelligible many of our ordinary ethical attitudes.

It is clear that one of the ordinary ethical attitudes Lewis has in mind is the idea that persons may be held morally responsible only for what is within their control, or what philosophers call the “control condition” for moral responsibility. Lewis admits that we often speak and act in ways that hold collectives accountable, but he argues that we are

⁵ This is not to deny that certain individuals in positions of leadership might have greater individual responsibilities by virtue of their role as leaders, nor is it necessarily to deny that nations might properly be ascribed collective responsibility for their part in this problem. I shall touch on both these possibilities below. My primary interest, however, is in the difficulties entailed in making sense of personal responsibility for climate change from the perspective of ordinary persons.

justified in doing so for merely pragmatic reasons, such as maintaining international order. “As a device for the achievement of practical ends, we sometimes have to accept collective responsibility” (24). Nevertheless, he insists that such accountability practices cannot properly ascribe *moral* responsibility because in such cases one person incurs consequences for what another has independently done and, as such, the control condition has not been met.

According to Lewis, the notion of responsibility as “liability to answer” is merely legal and provides no analogy to the meaning of the term in the ethical sense; “the mere fact of our liability to suffer a penalty is far too incidental a feature of conduct to constitute moral responsibility” (23). Moral responsibility, he argues, “means simply to be a moral agent, and this means to be an agent capable of acting rightly or wrongly in the sense in which such conduct is immediately morally good or morally bad, as the case may be” (23).

Undoubtedly, there are times – for example, in the treatment of children – where treating persons who are not morally responsible *as if they were* serves certain pragmatic or educational purposes (see McKenna). Such purposes are served, however, precisely because of the conceptual link, manifest in everyday practice, between *being responsible* and the warrant for *being held responsible*. We do not, in other words, generally conceive our everyday practices of holding each other accountable as mere threats of penalty based on arbitrary or even solely pragmatic reasons.⁶ As a central feature of our ordinary ethical attitudes, where it is met, the control condition does not simply register an essential feature of moral agency in Lewis’s sense, but operates as a commonsense principle of moral accountability. That is, it sets limits on what persons are properly answerable for.

Thus the proposal that we are willing to hold persons accountable for what we believe is entirely outside their control as frequently as would be the case if Lewis’s explanation of our practices is correct seems to run counter to the very intuition that connects the control condition to the concepts of responsibility and accountability more generally. The mere fact that we can and sometimes do allow some person, X, to incur the consequences for some action, A, which is wholly attributable to the will of Y, does not mean that such reasoning is paradigmatic of our everyday ascriptions of collective or shared responsibility. A far more suitable explanation of our general willingness to allow X, or better X and Y together, to incur the consequences for A is that much of the time we believe – perhaps in light of some feature of A or the group to which X and Y collectively belong – that *both* X and Y have some share in bringing about A. Where X and Y each intend to contribute to the collective goal of A, but neither plays a sufficient role in bringing A about, the intuitive force of the control condition does not generally lead us to conclude that neither X nor Y is responsible, but bears, instead, on their collective plans and capacities; that is, on their shared responsibility for A.

⁶ This is not to deny that determining the assignment of moral burdens, especially in cases of institutions, often involves pragmatic considerations, but simply to call into question the consistency of Lewis’s claim that the meaning of responsibility as “liability to answer” does not provide any analogy to the meaning of responsibility in an ethical sense (23) with his appeal to the evidence provided by our “ordinary ethical attitudes.”

These observations about our ordinary practices are not intended to demonstrate that the control condition can be met by groups or organizations *qua* irreducible collectives, but to draw attention to the fact that Lewis's interpretation of the control condition presupposes that shared participation in action is *de facto* impossible in any meaningful moral sense. As such, ascriptions of moral responsibility are only appropriate where the harm in question is wholly attributable to the agency of an individual. This, however, assumes rather than proves Lewis's endorsement of what Christopher Kutz appropriately terms "evaluative solipsism" (4), which holds that the proper basis for evaluating moral responsibility is limited to the content or effects of an individual will.

Evaluative solipsism is characteristic of a distinctively modern and individualistic conception of moral agency. It is a well-known feature of Kantian philosophy, for example, that questions of responsibility are to be answered only by reference to the content of the agent's will. Thus, neither an agent's particular relations with others, nor the actions of others, unless coercive, are relevant to determining the moral worth of her actions. In addition to isolating the basis for evaluating moral responsibility from any influence that the actions of others may have on one's decision, such "relational solipsism" (Kutz: 4) lends support to the idea that no agent can be held morally responsible for a harm caused by the actions of another. Following Kutz, I shall label this the Autonomy Principle.

In addition to the control condition and the Autonomy Principle, Kutz identifies one further commonsense moral principle characteristic of evaluative solipsism. "The Individual Difference Principle holds that I am only accountable for a harm if something I did made a difference to its occurrence" (3). According to Kutz, the relationally solipsistic basis for responsibility conspires with a causal solipsism, wherein "the object of evaluation is solely what an individual has caused or meant to cause," such that, "causal relations that depend upon sets of individual acts, but upon no particular individual act, fall outside the bounds of individual normative evaluation" (5). As we shall see, one of the most significant obstacles to making sense of responsibility for climate change lies in a concern not about the specific content of an individual will, but with its limited effects on the harm in question.

Taken together, the control condition, Autonomy Principle, and Individual Difference Principle support the assumption that any harm for which an agent may be held morally responsible must be ascribable to the agent alone and, as such, preclude the possibility of ascribing moral responsibility not only to collectives as such, but to individuals by virtue of their complicity in a collective harm. In other words, the ordinary moral intuitions characteristic of evaluative solipsism are obstacles to making sense of both collective and shared responsibility.

Although the individualistic conception of moral agency that underlies such reasoning has clear roots in Kantian philosophy, its pervasive role in undermining notions of collective and shared responsibility is not solely attributable to Kant or any single philosophical theory. Rather, it is the historical result of a more general conviction that in matters of morality and politics, consideration of the individual subject reigns supreme. Although this conviction, in its various guises, has been the target of much criticism over the last thirty years, I shall not rehearse all of these criticisms here (see Taylor; MacIntyre; Sandel; Walzer; and Benedict 2009a). The central point I want to emphasize in this essay is that evaluative solipsism

impacts our common non-philosophical understanding of responsibility in ways that tend to preclude assigning moral responsibility for climate change. How poorly evaluative solipsism fares when it comes to the particular problem of climate change is only further reason for questioning whether it should have the last word on behalf of our ordinary moral intuitions.

Let me conclude this section by saying that Lewis is right to be worried about the use of “guilt by association” reasoning where it is, in fact, wholly indiscriminate in its ascription of blame. As already gestured to above, however, such wholly indiscriminate reasoning is not paradigmatic of our ordinary practices of ascribing responsibility to groups or to persons by virtue of their participation in joint action. Indeed, much of the literature on collective responsibility seeks to identify the very specific features a group must have – for example, shared-decision making procedures, joint intentions, ties of solidarity, shared values, or common interests – if the ascription of collectively responsible is to be warranted. As we shall see, the need to identify such group features presents its own challenges to ascribing collective responsibility for climate change. Before turning to these difficulties, however, it will help to consider in greater detail how the principles of evaluative solipsism fair when applied to the particular problem of climate change.

Individual, Collective, and Shared Responsibility for Climate Change

Suppose I am texting while driving and, as a result, I run a stop sign and crash into another car. There is a direct causal connection between my texting and the accident. Moreover, this causal connection is clear to me because the effects of my action are both spatially and temporally local. Let us also suppose that, given the speed I was driving, no other drivers involved in the accident could have been reasonably expected to act in a way that would have had an effect on whether or not the accident occurred. In this case, what I did, texting while driving, made a difference in the occurrence of a particular harm, the accident. Although I did not directly intend the accident, intentionally texting while driving is risky behavior and it is generally thought that such negligence renders me both morally and legally responsible for the accident, though it may render me less or differently responsible than if I had left the house with the intention of causing a car accident. Had I not been texting, there would have been no accident and, as such, it seems clear that I bear an individual responsibility for this accident that the other drivers do not. Cases like this one highlight the intuitive appeal of the logic behind the Individual Difference Principle.⁷

Now suppose that I am not texting while driving, but simply enjoying a long Sunday drive through the country.⁸ In doing so, I am performing an action that results in the emission of green house gases (GHG). Here, again, I may not intend to cause climate

⁷ It might be suggested that it is merely a matter of my bad luck that another car was present for me to crash into and, thus, the control condition has not been met to the satisfaction of the evaluative solipsist in this example. Although proponents of moral luck are among those critical of evaluative solipsism, I am not here concerned to engage in a debate about moral luck. My aim is simply to provide an example of individual responsibility wherein the conditions are such that the intuitive force of Individual Difference Principle, as it tends to operate in our everyday ethical experience, is clear. The fact that my clear causal connection to the accident might still run up against the limitations set by evaluative solipsism is but further evidence for questioning such limitations.

⁸ The example of wasteful driving is the focus of Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument cited below.

change. Let us suppose, however, that I am aware that human emissions of greenhouse gases cause climate change and that climate change is likely to have catastrophic global effects at some point in the future. Insofar as I know that GHG emissions contribute to climate change, it appears that I am not simply engaging in risky or negligent behavior, but knowingly contributing to a specific harm. Nevertheless, my individual responsibility for the harm in this case seems far less obvious than in the case of the car accident. This is because both my ability to make sense of the causal connection between my drive and the catastrophic effects of climate change and the actual connection itself are significantly limited by the facts of climate change.

As Stephen Gardiner rightly points out, in the case of climate change, effects are not local to the actions that cause them but spatially and temporally dispersed. Causes and effects are spatially dispersed insofar as “the impact of any particular emission of greenhouse gases is not realized solely at its source, either individual or geographical; rather impacts are dispersed to other actors and regions of the Earth” (399). They are temporally dispersed because “the full, cumulative effects of our current emissions will not be realized for some time in the future” (403). Thus, unlike the car accident, the specific impact my Sunday drive has on the environment is not immediate or easily discernable.

The same facts about climate change that account for the dispersion of causes and effects also account for the second major obstacle to making sense of my causal role in this case. Gardiner labels this obstacle the fragmentation of agency: “Climate change is not caused by a single agent, but by a vast number of individuals and institutions not unified by a comprehensive structure of agency” (399). Although GHG emissions cause climate change and my Sunday drive emits greenhouse gases, the emissions of my Sunday drive do not *on their own* cause climate change. Moreover, assuming the GHG emissions of everyone else stay at their current levels, my decision not to take a Sunday drive – or my decision never to drive again, for that matter – would seem to make no considerable difference to the occurrence of climate change. Thus, employing the Individual Difference Principle, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues that individual actions, such as taking a Sunday drive, cannot be considered morally wrong. Ordinary individuals do not have even a *prima facie* moral duty to avoid or curtail the non-essential production of GHG emissions because no single ordinary individual can be said to be causally responsible for the harmful effects of climate change (298-99).

From the standpoint of evaluative solipsism, the dispersion of causes and effects and the fragmentation of agency relieve any particular ordinary individual of direct causal and, therefore, moral responsibility for climate change. Because my actions, which are to be evaluated in isolation from the actions of others, can make no significant difference to the problem of climate change, I am not morally responsible for this problem. Of course, my efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change could have a greater causal effect if they were coordinated with the like efforts of others; that is, if we acted collectively. That this is so, however, only further highlights the limitations of evaluative solipsism, which lacks the resources to explain why I might have a moral responsibility to coordinate my actions with others in order to avert a harm that could not be averted through my agency alone. In other words, the collective nature of the problem of climate change precludes holding individuals morally responsible according to the conditions set by the principles constitutive of

evaluative solipsism. Yet it is these same principles that conspire to deny the possibility of both shared and collective moral responsibility. As a result, it seems that no one is morally responsible for climate change.

At this point, it might be suggested that the Sunday drive example unfairly limits the potential impact of individual actions. After all, some individuals have the ability to do much more than reduce their own GHG emissions. Leaders of state and corporate CEO's, for example, have the power to adopt regulatory practices and, thereby, create the conditions under which the decisions of ordinary persons – now safeguarded from so-called free riders – could have a greater positive collective impact. And many ordinary persons, for their part, could lobby their political leaders or put consumer pressure on corporate CEO's to adopt such regulatory practices. I am happy to concede both points, along with the fact that persons in leadership roles might have special responsibilities simply by virtue of their position in such roles. It is important to note, however, that if such individuals are capable of greater causal impact on climate change it is not by virtue of their agency alone. Rather, it is because they are in a better position, as a result of the power they possess by virtue of their job or their ability to actively participate in politics, to instigate and facilitate coordinated action with others.⁹

If reflection on responsibility for climate change remains focused on our individual causal contributions, considered apart from what we might accomplish collectively through coordinated action with others, it is difficult to see how any particular individual would be motivated by a sense of personal responsibility to change her behavior. If, however, personal responsibility for climate change is viewed in light of our capacity to participate in collective action, the moral failing is more clear because the intuitive force of the control condition now bears on these collective capacities. So conceived, it is not any one individual's capacity to prevent this harm, but our shared capacity for collective action, which explains the applicability of the harm principle to the problem of climate change. In other words, even though no one person is fully individually responsible for climate change, we share responsibility for our joint failure to effectively coordinate our actions in ways that could prevent its most catastrophic effects.

This is not to say that persons wholly unaware of the threat of climate change should be held responsible for failing to coordinate actions directed at its prevention. I am suggesting, rather, that in reflecting on their responsibility for climate change, ordinary persons shift the focus of that reflection away from the direct causal influence of isolated agents, toward a more realistic understanding of the efficacy of human actions, which often – and not only in the case of climate change – depends upon, and is interconnected with, the actions of others.

⁹ Sinnott-Armstrong, for example, admits that, “even if individuals have no moral obligations not to waste gas by taking unnecessary Sunday drives just for fun, governments still have moral obligations to fight global warming, because they can make a difference” (312). I agree with Sinnott-Armstrong about the obligations of governments, but the reason for this cannot simply be that governments can do more than ordinary individuals. The difference any single government can make is still likely too small to pass the test of the Individual Difference Principle. More importantly, the difference governments can make is only possible because of their increased capacity to facilitate collective action. Thus simply treating governments as more efficacious individuals is not sufficient to explain the source of their responsibility with respect to this problem.

Focusing on the collective plans, social interactions, and attitudes that contribute to anthropogenic climate change enables us to see more clearly the responsibility we share, even though no one of us has full control over the harm itself.

To be sure, not all persons aware of the threat of climate change are equally situated in their capacity to participate in collective action aimed at mitigating it. Where organizational structures are not already in place, the scope of the ordinary person's responsibility might extend simply to facilitating greater organization or encouraging new attitudes. Acknowledging that differently situated persons may have different kinds of responsibility is not, however, to fall back to the idea that each individual is responsible for what she would have been responsible for had we not taken the capacity for collective action into account. For, as we have already seen, if we do not take our capacity for collective action into account, it seems no individual bears any responsibility. The point is to arrive at a sense of personal responsibility via recognition of our shared responsibility to act collectively. What each is responsible to do in light of that recognition may yet differ for differently situated persons.

Nonetheless, three questions come readily to mind: First, given the lack of success in establishing international emissions regulations, is it even plausible to think we can act collectively in the ways needed to mitigate climate change? Second, does the emphasis on our capacity for collective action require invoking the concept of collective, and not simply shared, responsibility? Finally, being aware of climate change and directly intending to further the harm of climate change are two different things. Can persons who do not directly intend the harmful effects of climate change really be said to share in responsibility for those effects? I shall take the remainder of the essay to address each of these in turn.

Admittedly, when it comes to climate change, our track record in exercising our capacity for collective action is not a good one. Attempts at international treaty negotiations have thus far failed to result in agreements capable of producing anywhere near the global reduction in GHG emissions needed to prevent catastrophic climate change. The failure of such attempts is largely due to the refusal of developed nations, such as the United States, to agree to the conditions set by these treaties. Although there is little doubt that such refusals have been motivated, at least in part, by short-sighted considerations of self-interest, the moral justification given, first at Kyoto and then at Copenhagen, for rejecting proposed conditions is that they are unfair because they require developed nations to do more to reduce emissions than developing nations.

The claim that such conditions are unfair treats as morally irrelevant considerations about both the disproportionately large historical contribution of emissions by developed nations and the significantly lower capacity of developing nations to cut emissions (Singer: 33-34; Shue: 537).¹⁰ I suspect such considerations have been neglected, at least in part, because they endeavor to hold the members of each nation collectively responsible in

¹⁰ Although it might be argued that for much of the advancement of anthropogenic climate change persons were unaware of the effects of their actions, the governments of developed nations have had good reason to curtail emissions since at least 1990, when the International Panel on Climate Change published its first assessment report.

proportion to the nation's contribution or capacities and, as such, must contend with the assumptions of evaluative solipsism discussed above. Regardless of whether or not it is appropriate to ascribe collective responsibility to nations – a question to which I shall return presently – the actual burden of significantly cutting the emissions of any nation will be born, not by the nation as such, but by its individual citizens. Because policy-makers in democratic societies, such as the United States, require the political support of their citizens, it is the ordinary citizen who needs to accept and endorse the changes in her behavior that adopting new emissions standards would require. As I mentioned above, without a coherent sense of shared responsibility for climate change, it is unlikely that ordinary persons will be motivated to accept such changes. Thus the fact that past attempts at large-scale collective action have failed to produce the changes we need is no reason to reject the idea that a coherent sense of responsibility may yet be derived from reflection on our shared capacity for collective action. For those failures are at least partly due to the very difficulties entailed in conceiving responsibility for climate change apart from considering our capacity for collective action.

Acknowledging the moral significance of our capacity for collective action does not require accepting the view that we are *collectively responsible* for climate change. Indeed, in light of the global nature of the problem of climate change, accepting such a view of the responsibility of ordinary persons is neither philosophically feasible nor strategically beneficial. As I mentioned briefly in the previous section, philosophical proponents of the concept of collective responsibility are generally concerned to identify the specific features a group must have if the group, as such, is to be held responsible for some harm. Features, such as organized decision making structures, clear leadership, bonds of solidarity, procedures for inter-subjective communication, mutual input, and so forth, provide the basis – often by analogy with the relevant features of individual agency – for determining whether the group, *qua* irreducible collective, is the subject responsible for the harm in question. With respect to the possible collective responsibility of nations, for example, it has been argued that where there are clearly defined decision-making procedures, structures of leadership, and rules for determining the various roles members of the nation are to play in making national policy, the nation can properly be treated as if it were an individual agent. Alternatively, it might be argued that where the bonds of national solidarity are sufficiently strong and there is a clear understanding of the nation's common interests, it is possible to speak of the nation's collective consciousness with respect to some issue.

Although I do not deny that some such combination of features belonging to a group may warrant holding that group collectively responsible, I am skeptical that the actual features of nations generally – and the United States in particular – can support such an analogy with individual agency. Regardless, we need not resolve this question here. As emphasized above, even if a nation can properly be held responsible for its contribution to climate change, instituting policy reflective of that responsibility requires the endorsement of the members of that nation. As a strategy for motivating a greater sense of personal responsibility, emphasizing the collective responsibility of a nation will be less successful than emphasizing the shared responsibility of ordinary citizens and their leaders. More to the point, the collective action needed to address the problem of climate change requires

international coordination and the international community does not have the requisite group features to hold it, *qua* collective, responsible for this problem.

It will help, then, to consider the responsibility of a group that lacks formal structure. Perhaps the most discussed example is that of a group of beach-goers witnessing a man drowning. The example assumes that no one individual is capable of saving the drowning man on her own. Collective action is required, but the group is largely unstructured; there is no clear decision-making structure in place and their short time at the beach is hardly a basis for developing bonds of solidarity. Nevertheless, Virginia Held argues,

In some cases all the individuals in a random collective are responsible for not acting to transform the collection into an organized group, even though none of these individuals is responsible for not taking the action that ought to have been taken by an organized group in these circumstances (98).

Similarly, May argues inaction in such a situation warrants ascribing shared responsibility to the group as long as it is plausible “to think that the group could have developed a sufficient structure in time to allow the group to act collectively to prevent the harm” (1990: 276).

If it is obvious to the reasonable person both that action rather than inaction is called for and that the action called for requires coordination with other members of the group, the group may be said to share responsibility for failing to coordinate their actions. Depending on what structures are already in place, the group may be responsible for failing to utilize existing organizational structures to act collectively or for failing to work toward establishing such structures.

Although it questionable whether the people on beach could have coordinated their actions in time to save the drowning man, it is certainly plausible to think many of us who are aware of the problem of climate change could act to coordinate our efforts in ways capable of preventing at least some of its most harmful effects. Although it may lack the structure needed to ascribe collective responsibility, unlike the bystanders on the beach, the international community is not a mere random collection of people. Rather, it has the makings of a loosely structured group, the members of which could work together to redirect and coordinate the priorities of nations, trade organizations, and various global corporations, toward facilitating large-scale collective action aimed at preventing some of the effects of climate change.

This brings us to the third and final question raised above. This may be reformulated as the following objection to what I have suggested thus far: Even where persons are aware both of anthropogenic climate change and their capacity to prevent at least some of its harmful effects by coordinating their actions with others, they cannot be said to share in responsibility for these effects if they do not directly intend to participate in action (or inaction) aimed at producing them. Most ordinary persons, the objection continues, do not directly intend to further the harmful effects of climate change when going about their daily activities.¹¹ Thus the common failure to coordinate action aimed at preventing climate

¹¹ Although largely true, this observation draws on the more general fact that climate change is not a prominent consideration in many people’s daily activities. Where one is aware of the problem of climate change, however,

change is just so many unintended non-occurrences and does not constitute an omission for which the group shares moral responsibility.

The primary force of this objection rests on the assumption that evaluations of responsibility for climate change ought to be exclusively concerned with what an agent directly intends. As such, it denies from the outset the possible moral relevance of what Jeremy Bentham calls oblique intention: the foreseen consequence of a voluntary action, which does not strictly or directly aim at the consequence in question. If my daily activities give me occasion to reflect on my responsibility as it relates to climate change – and I do so, not from the perspective of the evaluative solipsist, but in full recognition of the possibility of preventing this harm through coordinated actions with others – it seems my continued inaction can be explained in one of two ways: I might choose to do nothing to facilitate such coordination. Here, I directly intend not to act and the objection in question no longer applies. Alternatively, I might recognize the harmful effects of climate change as a foreseeable consequence of a shared failure to act collectively, but directly intend something else, such as enjoying a scenic drive, or furthering my career, or watering my lawn, or any of the infinite aims of daily activity. From the standpoint of the objection under discussion, evaluation of responsibility for the voluntary actions constitutive of daily life ought to consider only what is directly intended. Where mitigating or furthering climate change is not directly intended, the agent bears no responsibility in relation to climate change.

To foresee some harm as a consequence of one's actions is clearly not the same as directly intending that harm.¹² And it is often the case that the distinction between the two provides good reason for not holding the agent responsible for what he intends only obliquely. I might, for example, be aware that if I fail some student, she will be denied acceptance into graduate school. Despite such awareness, I do not directly intend to harm her chances for admission and it would be inappropriate to hold me responsible for this, not only because the student is responsible for her own poor performance, but because treating considerations external to the quality of her work as irrelevant is part of fulfilling my responsibilities as a fair grader. In this case, considering only what I directly intend is clearly sufficient for evaluating my responsibility. The reason this is so, however, has a good deal to do with the specifics of the case. In other cases of evaluating responsibility, especially responsibility for inaction, it is less clear that oblique intentions are entirely irrelevant.

Consider an altered version of the drowning man example introduced above. Suppose I am enjoying a day at the beach when I notice a nearby child struggling to gain her breath in the shallow water I am standing in. In this case, I am not part of a group of bystanders and saving the child does not require coordinating my actions with others. Nevertheless, I do not reach over and pull the child up, nor do I yell out to distant others on the beach. I simply turn away and continue to watch the beautiful water. Once again, not taking action to prevent the foreseeable harm that will come to this child can be explained in one of two ways. If I explicitly choose not to act, it seems clear that I am at least partly responsible for

failure to take it seriously hardly seems sufficient to excuse one from responsibility. Because a full defense of this point requires considerations of character that will take me too far afield, I shall not pursue it here.

¹² I am grateful to my colleague Chris Pliatska for his feedback on the following discussion of this point.

allowing this harm to occur. Perhaps, however, I directly intended *only* to enjoy the beautiful view. Although it was clear the child was drowning, I might insist, it was not my direct intention to allow that harm to happen and I am not, therefore, responsible for it in any way.

In the case of failing my student, the scope of my responsibilities to grade her fairly encourages exclusive focus on my direct intention. In the case of the drowning child, however, it seems clearly unreasonable – if not preposterous – to focus exclusively on my direct intention to enjoy the view. While a formal account of the relevant criteria for determining when it is appropriate to focus exclusively on direct intentions is beyond the scope of this paper, the case of the drowning child suggests that such considerations are not always sufficient to make sense of the responsibility an agent bears for harms brought about by her voluntary action (or inaction). Insofar as we are aware of the problem of climate change, the situation we find ourselves in is not all that different from the bystanders on the beach, except that the foreseeable consequence of our continued inaction is not the loss of one life, but billions. To say we share no responsibility for this great harm because our daily activities happen to be directly intended toward something else is akin to saying those bystanders share no responsibility for the death of the drowning man because each directly intended merely to enjoy the view.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to identify and sort through some of the main philosophical obstacles to making sense of responsibility for climate change. Because these obstacles take the form of certain ordinary moral intuitions, it is easy to overlook the problematic ways in which they limit our ability to evaluate responsibility for this problem. As a result, there is a strong temptation to reason as follows: Because I neither cause climate change on my own, nor do I directly intend it, I am not morally responsible to do anything about it. If we shift the focus of our reflection away from individual causal contributions and toward our collective capacities, however, the question is no longer “what difference can I make?” but “what difference can we make?” (Kutz: 12). Much like the bystanders on the beach, persons who are aware both of anthropogenic climate change and their capacity to prevent at least some of its harmful effects through coordinated actions with others are part of a group, loosely structured as it may be, which shares a responsibility to facilitate collective action aimed at mitigating this threat.

In closing, I should like to point out that focusing on our capacity for collective action invites us to consider the ways in which our attitudes, and not just our actions, contribute to patterns of collective behavior. Exclusive focus on the direct causal contribution of individual actions not only neglects the powerful influence culturally shared attitudes toward the environment continue to have on the moral priorities of ordinary individuals, but perpetuates a cynical view of our capacity to change by emphasizing the inefficacy of individual efforts (Jameison: 150). Establishing new practices of accountability grounded in our shared responsibility for climate change both encourages and requires confidence in each other. The greater our ability to see the problem of climate change through the lens of Benedict’s call to solidarity – that is, to see ourselves as literally sharing in the responsibility and fate of one another – the greater our ability to remain optimistic in the face such great challenges.

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