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Individual Obligations, Climate Change, and Shared Responsibility

Climate change threatens to impact the environment and human life in unprecedented ways. These impacts are already being seen, perhaps most dramatically in the case of Pacific Island nations that are being overtaken by rising sea levels.[1] Despite this, in the American context at least, galvanizing support for mitigation and adaptation efforts proves difficult. Given shifting dynamics in American politics, the progress made by the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, which outlined support for mitigation and adaptation strategies, is under threat in ways that may not only stunt progress but could increase global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

One reason why climate change remains an intractable problem is that, while the causes of climate change are known, understanding precisely who has an obligation to mitigate the harms created by climate change is difficult.[2] Climate change is a complex phenomenon made even more morally complicated given many of its specific features. The causes and effects of climate change are both spatially diffuse and temporally distributed, making it impossible to trace an individual instance of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to a specific climate event. Those who currently contribute to the problem do so at multiple levels of agency (e.g., individual, collective, state, corporate, etc.) and which level of agency ought to be the primary focus of concern remains a matter of debate. Additionally, those who are negatively affected by increased climate variability are differentially distributed across the globe, and the harms inflicted by climate change often have as much to do with the

1 See Nobuo Mimura et al., "Small Islands." in *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, contribution of Working Group II to the *Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, eds. M.L. Parry, O.F. Canziani, J.P. Palutikof, P.J. van der Linden and C.E. Hanson (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007): 687–716.

2 Stephen Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); John Broome, *Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).

existing social and economic features of a place as with the impacts of any specific climate event.

Given these complexities, some question the existence of individual moral obligations for climate change. For example, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has suggested that while choosing to spend one's Sunday joyriding in a gas guzzling vehicle seems problematic within the context of anthropogenic climate change, no moral principles can be found to ground such an intuition.[3] Others, who like Sinnott-Armstrong reject the existence of individual moral obligations to refrain from contributing to climate change, do so in the process of shifting focus onto the obligations of larger entities (e.g., corporations, states, and intergovernmental bodies) as the primary agents of concern regarding mitigation.[4] This shift of focus sometimes coincides with a recognition that there may be positive obligations for individuals to participate in collective action to address climate change, typically by lobbying large scale entities to pass environmentally friendly legislation, adopting mitigation policies, funding adaptation efforts, etc.

In this paper, I consider the existence of individual moral obligations in the face of climate change. By engaging with Walter-Sinnott Armstrong and Avram Hiller's debate concerning the moral saliency of individual's GHG emissions, I diagnose a fit problem that exists in the application of our ordinary ways of thinking about individual moral obligations (or what I call the causal liability model) to the ethical challenges of climate change. To show that this fit problem exists, I demonstrate how specific phenomenological features of climate change undermine attempts to justify the existence of individual moral obligations for climate change, even if we accept that individual acts are themselves causally responsible for harms related to climate change. I argue the fit problem exists because the causal liability model presumes a certain kind of use case (i.e., one that is paradigmatically found in close individual interactions) that does not obtain for individuals in their experience of contributing to climate change. In light of this fit problem, I suggest that the question of individual moral obligations concerning climate change must be preceded by a more through explanation of the nature of climate change as a moral problem. While climate change presents a multifaceted challenge, with environmental, technical, social, economic, and political components, I argue that in order to assess the existence of individual

3 Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations." in *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Econoics, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Richard Howarth, vol. 5, Advances in the Economics of Environmental Research (Elsevier, 2005).

4 See, for example, Baylor L. Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons." *Environmental Values* 12, no. 3 (2003): 271–87.

obligations concerning climate change, we must focus on this challenge as a matter of social justice. By considering the ways in which climate change harms result from social and economic arrangements that distribute advantages, disadvantages, and risks all over the globe, we can begin to formulate a better understanding of what kind of obligations individuals may have in light of this kind of harm. I conclude by proposing two paths for understanding individual moral obligations as a matter of shared responsibility, based on the work of Iris Young and Larry May, as potential avenues for exploration.

1. Sunday Drives and Shirking Responsibility

In "It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations," Sinnott-Armstrong notes that, like many others, his intuitions tell him that individuals have a moral obligation to limit their use of fossil fuels. Driving in a wasteful fashion is, according to such intuitions, an act that ought to be deemed morally blameworthy. He takes up the specific case of a Sunday joy-ride, that is, borrowing a gas guzzling vehicle to take out for a spin on a Sunday afternoon, and asks whether this act is morally problematic and whether the driver in the scenario has a moral obligation to avoid expelling these luxury emissions. Although he recognizes that many environmentalists share the intuition that this kind of GHG emission is morally problematic, ultimately he can find no moral principle to justify this claim. As a result, he concludes that there are no individual moral obligations concerning climate change mitigation. That is, individuals are not morally obligated to reduce their impact on the environment when they can. But, why not?

On his account, the GHG emissions created by any one individual agent neither cause a specific harm nor would abstaining from such acts change the ultimate consequences of global climate change. One afternoon of joyriding in a gas guzzling vehicle does not by itself cause any harm, and choosing not to take the ride does not prevent harm from eventually befalling someone else in any discernable sense. Because individual acts like these are not causally sufficient for producing harm and eliminating a particular instance of emissions has little influence on the ultimate consequences of climate change, individual contributions are not subject to moral disapprobation. On this reading, aggregate emissions, not individual contributions, cause harm when it comes to climate change. By concluding that Sunday joy-rides cause no harm and abstaining from the act would remedy no harm, Sinnott-Armstrong suggests that individuals are not morally obliged to abstain from GHG emitting behavior in their daily lives.

An important caveat to Sinnott-Armstrong's position is that the absence of a principle that would ground negative duties concerning GHG emissions, does not preclude the existence of relevant positive duties concerning anthropogenic climate change. He recognizes that individuals could, for example, be understood as having positive obligations concerning the issue, for example, to encourage their governments to pass legislation regarding vehicle emission standards.[5] Individuals themselves, however, take on no individual-level responsibilities concerning mitigation. That is, individuals are not morally blameworthy for contributing to climate change in their everyday actions, even when the contributions in question are easily avoidable. Others have come to a similar conclusion. Baylor Johnson, for example, frames climate change harms as a tragedy of the commons and suggests that individuals have no moral obligations to abstain unilaterally from GHG emissions when doing so will have no result on preventing or mitigating the harmful effects of climate change overall.[6]

Sinnott-Armstrong's and Johnson's conclusions about the absence of individual moral obligations concerning climate change are based on drawing a strict distinction between obligations to avoid contributing to climate change and obligations to participate in collective action to alter the systemic causes that ultimately lead to climate change. Taking up the latter (e.g., as an individual member of a state), for example, by participating in collective action to influence one's government to institute positive environmental policies, is understood as distinct from attributions of individual moral obligations in the first sense.[7] While I discuss the question of positive obligations to participate in collective action concerning climate change below, my focus in what follows is on the question of individual moral obligations concerning mitigation.

Generally obligations to abstain from harm are attributed to agents based on a number of common criteria for determining responsibility. These criteria, amongst other things, require that the act in question be morally faulty in some way, typically by causing unjustified harm to others.[8] In accordance with this ordinary way of attributing blame or praise, Sinnott-Armstrong's argument begins with and is based upon the

5 While recognizing that such obligations may exist, Sinnott-Armstrong does not argue for the existence of positive obligations regarding climate change.

6 Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons".

7 Marion Hourdequin also rejects the decoupling of individual and collective obligations in the case of anthropogenic climate change. See Marion Hourdequin, "Climate, Collective Action and Individual Ethical Obligations." *Environmental Values* 19, no. 4 (2010): 443–464.

8 Joel Feinberg, *Doing and Deserving: Essays in the Theory of Responsibility* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974).

question of whether a Sunday joy-ride actually causes harm. In ordinary cases, such attributions of blame or praise take place within a context in which the causes and effects in question are easily traceable and faulty acts are simple to discern. For example, if someone steals a car to take a joyride, the theft is identifiable as a morally faulty act and the causal chain between the individual who stole the car and the owner of the vehicle who is harmed is relatively easy to trace. The theft is a necessary cause of harm, since without it the harm would not occur. The theft is also sufficient for causing harm without the involvement of any other actors or contributing circumstances.

In order to be worthy of moral condemnation, a Sunday joy-riding would also have to be a necessary and sufficient cause of some identifiable harm. But this is not the case on Sinnott-Armstrong's reading. Climate scientists now report that atmospheric levels of CO_2 have surpassed 400ppm, and, as a result, we can already expect rising global temperatures and increased climate variability.[9] Even if one were to abstain from their Sunday joy-ride, someone else would presumably contribute these emissions in the long run. A few more gallons of fossil fuels burnt seems to make no difference if broader changes, at the level of states, corporations, and international agreements, are not made. Given that the harms that result from climate change are inevitable, one additional instance of individual emissions (i.e., one more Sunday joy-ride) is not necessary for causing any harm.

A single Sunday joy-ride is also not a sufficient cause of harm. By itself, one instance of driving does not cause climate change or the harms that result from increased climate variability. As Sinnott-Armstrong notes, "global warming will not occur unless lots of other people also expel greenhouse gasses."[10] An implication of Sinnott-Armstrong's argument is that blame for a collective harm caused by aggregated emissions cannot be distributed to the individual actors embedded in that systemic processes. Because of this, he concludes that there are no individual moral obligations to abstain from GHG emitting behavior.

There are at minimum two avenues through which we might question Sinnott-Armstrong's conclusion. First, we could question the truth of Sinnott-Armstrong's claim that individual level emissions do not in fact cause harm. Avram Hiller has done this in detail and in the next section I consider his argument. A second approach is to deny the relevance of the model of individual moral obligation on which Sinnott-Armstrong's argument rests. Following an examination of Hiller's response

9 Nicola Jones, "How the World Passed a Carbon Threshold and Why It Matters." *YaleEnvironment360*, 2017.

10 Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault." 297.

to Sinnott-Armstrong, I advance the second approach and argue that, even if we grant that Hiller successfully demonstrates that individual GHG emissions cause significant harm, these acts still lack a number of other characteristics that are necessary for a robust attribution of individual moral obligation under the traditional model. Instead of (a) concluding that Sinnott-Armstrong is correct and that no individual moral obligations regarding GHG emissions exist or (b) attempting to salvage the traditional model by showing how it can in fact ground individual moral obligations for GHG emissions, I will instead (c) examine why this model of moral obligations will inevitably face such difficulties when applied to climate change and ultimately suggest that discussions of individual obligations and climate change need to move beyond this model.

2. Causing Harm and the Complications of Climate Change

Hiller responds to Sinnott-Armstrong by examining how many of those who reject the existence of individual moral obligations concerning climate change rely on an assumption of the causal inefficacy of individual GHG emissions. This position presumes that "most or all common individual actions, and even full individual lives, are too causally insignificant to make *any* difference with regard to climate change."[11] Hiller attempts to demonstrate that this assumption is false in two different ways. First, if it were true that individual-level GHG emissions do not cause climate change, then it must be the case that something else does. Proponents of the individual causal inefficacy thesis hold that the aggregated effects of "everyone's driving" cause climate change, but they refuse to distribute causal responsibility to the individual acts that make up that aggregate. According to Hiller, this view implies that "everyone's driving would have to be some odd emergent entity that is not reducible to individual acts of driving," which he considers to be "far fetched, metaphysically."[12]

Hiller also considers the possibility of locating causal responsibility for climate change in "the system of driving," which would include acts like individual's taking Sunday joy-rides along with the many socio-economic structures which contribute to the use of fossil fuels in the transportation sector more broadly (e.g., political policies concerning emissions standards, the activities of the coal and natural gas industries, urban/suburban planning, etc.). However, Hiller maintains that it

11 Avram Hiller, "Climate Change and Individual Responsibility." *The Monist* 94, no. 3 (2011): 349.

12 Hiller, 354.

is untenable to blame "the system of driving" without recognizing how this entity is reducible to its many features and parts. While acts like an individual's choice to take a Sunday joy-ride are one small part of this system, individual use of fossil fuels plays an important role in driving the system of production, distribution, and consumption.

In addition to simply pointing out the metaphysical oddity of an aggregate harm that is irreducible to its individual components, Hiller's second response to the causal inefficiency view focuses on demonstrating that individual GHG emissions *do* in fact cause harm, by performing a dis-utility calculation on examples like a Sunday joy-ride. Following the work of John Nolt, which calculates the climate change harms produced by individual life choices taken as a whole, Hiller determines the amount of harm produced by a single Sunday joy-ride.[13]

Hiller suggests that if it is possible to quantify both the total amount of GHG emissions that contribute to climate change and the total amount of harm which can be expected to be caused by climate change, then we can determine the portion of that harm that is attributable to a specific instance of GHG emission. Following Nolt's calculations, Hiller concludes that if the GHG emitting behavior of "a full life of an American seriously harms the full life of one person (taking the more conservative of Nolt's estimates), then ¼ of a day's worth of emissions cause ¼ of a day's worth of serious harm. In other words, *going on a Sunday drive is the moral equivalent of ruining someone's afternoon*."[14] Although such a calculation cannot trace the actual emissions from one particular Sunday joy-ride to an actual person whose afternoon will be ruined (e.g., by a localized weather event in some other place), tracing the immediate cause to its direct effect is not necessary for Hiller's argument. The fact that I cannot know precisely who will be harmed by my action does not make the action morally irrelevant.

Because it is unlikely that humanity has passed some threshold of GHG emissions that would make additional contributions innocuous, and because we can reasonably expect more GHG emissions to increase the harms associated with anthropogenic climate change, Hiller concludes that individuals ought to abstain from GHG emitting behavior when easily available alternatives are present. In the case of a Sunday joy-ride, this behavior can reasonably be expected to cause some harm, and there are many available alternatives to taking a Sunday joy-ride that would cause less or no harm related to climate change (e.g., riding a bike, playing a board game, etc.). It should be noted the same cannot

13 John Nolt, "Greenhouse Gas Emission and the Domination of Posterity." in *The Ethics of Global Climate Change*, 2010.

14 Hiller, "Climate Change and Individual Responsibility." 357.

be said for cases where abstaining from using fossil fuels is not easily avoidable, i.e., subsistence emissions.[15] For example, a suburban dweller, whose only transportation to work is the use of vehicle, cannot as easily opt out of burning fossil fuels.

3. Climate Change and the Challenge to Ordinary Moral Concepts

While Hiller makes a compelling case for understanding individual emissions as being causally responsible for producing a calculable harm, there are other considerations at stake before determining whether an individual had a moral obligation to avoid causing that harm. Being the cause of some harm is, in itself, usually insufficient for determining whether a moral obligation exists. For example, someone may have acted involuntarily, unknowingly, or due to other factors that would serve to eliminate an obligation or mitigate blame. For this reason, it is necessary to get a more detailed account of the understanding of moral obligation that is implicitly at work in Sinnott-Armstrong's and Hiller's assessments of the Sunday joyrider. In doing so, I suggest that moral evaluations of individual acts typically rely on a phenomenology of agency that gives precedence to negative obligations to abstain from harms committed in localized interactions. Indicative of this phenomenology of agency is a model of moral obligation based in causal liability. In what follows, I explore the phenomenology of agency that the Sunday joyrider debate presupposes. I then articulate a number of common criteria, beyond determining a causal relation, that feature in moral judgments made under the causal liability model.

The causal liability model, generally speaking, seeks to assign negative duties to discreet agents who have intentionally caused some foreseeable harm. In order to better understand this model and how it fairs in assessments of moral obligations concerning climate change, I find it useful to turn to work on global responsibility that deals with moral problems of a similarly global scope to climate change. In "Responsibility in a Global Age," Samuel Scheffler describes the strain put on the traditional (Western) conception of moral responsibility when we are

15 Sinnott-Armstrong's focus on a Sunday joy ride ignores the more common case of the individual use of subsistence emissions, that is, those which are consumed for the purpose of maintaining one's life, such as getting to work or shopping for necessities. Options for how one conducts these everyday acts are significantly structured by one's social and economic opportunities. Affordable housing may not be close to good jobs and often someone's use of a gas-guzzling car is not a product of choice but the only affordable option given a lack of good public transportation or opportunities in one's community for ride sharing.

faced with global problems like famine and poverty. Setting aside consequentialist frameworks, he suggests that moral judgments about individual moral obligations tend to serve a restrictive function by seeking, in part, to limit the scope of an agent's responsibilities. For this reason, a common way of understanding our own moral obligations, Scheffler explains, gives precedence to negative duties (e.g., to not cause harm) in immediate contexts.

This restrictive function stems from what Scheffler calls a "complex phenomenology of agency," which involves a "characteristic way of experiencing ourselves as agents with causal powers… [in which] acts have primacy over omissions, near effects have primacy over remote effects, and individual effects have primacy over group effects."[16] This phenomenology of agency (or ordinary way of experiencing ourselves as moral actors) accounts for the tendency to give precedence to local interactions in our everyday moral thinking. This framework ends up shaping the way we approach most questions of moral obligation, even those that occur in more distant or complex contexts. This approach is well suited to evaluate small scale interactions between individual agents (e.g., a fender bender) and can be extended to some degree. For example, we might approach a moral judgment concerning a discrete instance of pollution, where dangerous chemicals in a river can be linked to a company's dumping upstream, from this view of agency. In this use case, the harm in question still fits the phenomenology of agency that Scheffler articulates because it involves discreet agents that are still relatively close in proximity. More complex use cases, however, may begin to outstrip the resources of this view. Scheffler explains that, when inhabiting this phenomenology of agency, we end up missing how "the earth has become an increasingly crowded place" and the "lives of its inhabitants are structured to an unprecedented degree by large, impersonal institutions and bureaucracies… [that] link the fates of people in multiple ways."[17] Concerning the Sunday joyrider scenario, what this phenomenology of agency obfuscates are the various ways in which individual GHG contributions take place within large-scale systemic relations (socio-economic, political, technological) that shape individual acts in ways that produce harm for distant and future others. Sinnott-Armstrong also recognizes the challenge, noting how climate change "operates on a much grander scale than my moral intuitions evolved to handle long ago when acts did not have such long term effects on future generations (or at least peo-

16 Samuel Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 39.

17 Scheffler, 40.

ple were not aware of such effects)."[18] That many of our moral concepts evolved before the potentially far reaching effects of human agency was a matter of prolonged reflection, may give us pause in presuming their use value in regard to climate change.

Dale Jamieson and Stephen Gardiner have noted the strain put on traditional moral concepts in the context of climate change. Jamieson, for example constructs a simple thought experiment to note how climate change stretches our moral imagination. His example begins with a simple case of a harm resulting from an individual interaction (i.e., Jack stealing Jill's bike). Gradually altering his example, Jamieson seeks to complicate and create distance between the agents in the scenario in a way that maps onto the problems raised by climate change. He revises the scenario to describe a case in which many individuals steal small parts of Jill's bike until it is gone. Then in its final iteration, Jamieson presents a case in which a diffuse group of past actors (of which Jack is a part) unintentionally contribute to circumstances that make it impossible for any future others (including Jill) to have bikes. The latter scenario better articulates, for Jamieson, the moral nature of climate change insofar as "climate change is not a matter of a clearly identifiable individual acting intentionally so as to inflict an identifiable harm on another identifiable individual, closely related in time and space."[19] Given how different climate change is from usual contexts in which assessments of moral obligations are made, Jamieson notes the need for "a revision of everyday understandings of moral responsibility" in order to better assess individual moral obligations concerning this phenomenon.[20] Stephen Gardiner echoes a similar sentiment noting the need for a "conceptual paradigm shift" in the ways that we think about moral obligations if we are to adequately deal with the challenges posed by climate change.[21]

4. Common Criteria for Assigning Obligations Under the Causal Liability Model

To better understand these calls for alternative ways of understanding individual obligations in the context of climate change, I first consider the model of moral obligation at work in the phenomenology of agency Scheffler describes. Sinnott-Armstrong and Hiller's debate is focused on

18 Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not My Fault." 297.

19 Dale Jamieson, "Climate Change, Responsibility, and Justice." *Science and Engineering Ethics* 16, no. 3 (2010): 437.

20 Jamieson, 438.

21 Stephen Gardiner, "The Heart of the Perfect Moral Storm." *Philosophy and Public Issues* 3, no. 1 (2013): 4.

the question of whether individuals are obligated to refrain from acts that unnecessarily contribute to climate change. In the previous section, I noted that this focus is indicative of a model of moral obligations (i.e., causal liability) which may be ill equipped to deal with the moral challenges produced by climate change. To demonstrate the existence of a fit problem between the causal liability model at work in this debate and the moral challenges posed by climate change, I turn to an examination of the common criteria that accompany moral judgments made under the casual liability model. In their simplest form, assertions of individual obligations refer to what one agent either ought to (or ought not) do in a specific context. When an individual fails to make good on their obligations, they are held responsible for their acts (typically through some form of moral disapprobation). In their most ordinary sense, individual moral judgments are made according to the causal liability model when they focus on attributing blame to specific agents for the harms that they produce in relatively immediate contexts. Application of this model thus produces a focus on whether the Sunday joy rider causes harm when he or she makes choices that produce unnecessary GHG emissions.

While causing some harm to another party is a central aspect of the causal liability model, there are other important criteria that support the determination of an individual moral obligation under this model. Here, I examine four of these criteria. Paradigmatically, moral obligations are (1) understood as being applicable to an agent in accordance with his or her *discreet acts within immediate relations* (e.g., for stealing someone else's property). Blameworthy acts call for reproach, restitution, or punishment, while praiseworthy acts warrant approbation and in some cases reward. Identifying the links of causation between an initial act and an end result serves as the initial step in grounding the assignment of an obligation. While a simple, discreet line of causation is not required to assign an individual moral praise or blame, the more simplicity there is in connecting an agent's act to a harmful effect makes judging behavior easier. As I demonstrate below, our experience of the causal nexus between an individual act that contributes to climate change and a harm that is produced is far from simple.

To be worthy of an assignment of blame under the causal liability model, an act must typically be (2) committed *voluntarily* and *intentionally*. While in the case of the Sunday joy-ride the agent in question voluntarily chooses to spend his or her day emitting GHG for pleasure, the intent behind the act is likely not to contribute to climate change. It is probably just to have fun. In this case, the agent in question may either fail to know or acknowledge their role in the larger systemic structure that creates climate change. While lacking a malicious intent does not in

itself exculpate an agent of blame, it may mitigate some responsibility. Intentional behavior is a mainstay of the causal liability model. However, many individual behaviors that contribute to climate change, like the Sunday joy ride, fails to map cleanly onto this common criterion.

In the case of the Sunday joy ride, an individual's ability to disregard the larger implications of one's action is made easier given that the act in question does not participate in a third common criterion of the causal liability model, which is that morally faulty acts are (3) typically *unusual* in some way. Acts like lying, cheating, and stealing stray from a presumed norm of social cooperation thus highlighting their faultiness. However, many individual acts that contribute to climate change can be characterized as completely ordinary. Taking a Sunday joy-ride, running one's air-conditioning on a hot day, choosing a meat-centric diet, and driving one's child to school are everyday activities amongst certain social classes and in certain regions. In these places, such acts don't deviate from a presumed norm of socially cooperative behavior. They are an everyday part of how certain people in certain parts of their world live their lives. On the causal liability model, however, precedence is given to acts that have an unusual quality in attempting to locate discreet causes of harm. In the same way as it would be odd to hold the oxygen in the atmosphere partially responsible for a fire rather than the person who left a campfire unattended in a drought, it is difficult for assignments of moral obligations to gain traction when they involve acts that are extraordinarily common.[22] These activities make up the backdrop of what many consider "normal living."

Another common criterion at work in the causal liability model concerns whether (4) the consequences of one's actions were *reasonably foreseeable*. If it is entirely impossible or extremely difficult to have foreseen the consequences of one's actions, this complication may remove or mitigate reproach. Random or coincidental effects rarely warrant blame. Determining whether the long term consequences of an individual instance of GHG emission is reasonable foreseeability faces serious obstacles, especially in the American context, given the political discourse surrounding climate change. First, the same challenges that make the causes and effects of individual contributions to climate change difficult to trace may lead some to view these connections as merely coincidental. Second, the prevalence of public disinformation campaigns concerning climate science creates a unique challenge for determining what counts as reasonably foreseeable in this context.[23] It is important to note

22 Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 21.

23 Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York:

that those who are well placed to adapt to increased climate variability caused by climate change demonstrate higher rates of denialism.[24] In examining what it takes to develop a "responsible trust" in climate science, Heidi Grasswick notes that "reflection on one's positionality is crucial in both revealing the ignorances that manifest themselves from positions of privilege and participating in the generation of a more 'strongly objective' form of knowledge (Harding 1991)."[25] For Grasswick, reflection on one's own privileged social position is a necessary condition of avoiding self-serving beliefs concerning climate change. While there is overwhelming consensus in the scientific community concerning the realities of climate change, the political discourse surrounding the issue continues to undermine trust in these findings. Whether such ignorance is willful and blameworthy or is in someway excusable is beyond the scope of this paper, but the political discourse surrounding climate change certainly thwarts the drawing of simple conclusions about whether the criteria of reasonable foreseeability is met for a Sunday joyrider.[26]

5. Challenges Posed by the Phenomenological Features of Climate Change

Even if we accept Hiller's conclusion that the Sunday joy rider is causing harm, the driver's actions still poorly fit the other criteria that commonly accompany assessments of individual moral obligation. The causal chain between the act of taking the joyride and some future harm due to increased climate variability is not easily traceable. While voluntarily choosing to take the joyride is indisputable, it is unlikely that this driver intends to cause harm. The act of driving, even for mere pleasure, is not unusual (in this context) and does not deviate from some established standard of socially acceptable behavior. And finally, whether or not the consequences of the driver's actions were reasonably foreseeable is complicated by climate change disinformation campaigns that work to breed doubt and thwart straightforward attempts to assign blame.

One might assume that since the act in question fails to fit neatly into the common criteria for the causal liability model, that there simply are no individual moral obligations to mitigate one's emissions. This is

Bloomsbury Press, 2010); Michael D. Doan, "Climate Change and Complacency." *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014).

24 Richard Wike, "High CO2 Emitters Are Less Intensely Concerned about Climate Change." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog), November 3, 2015, http://www.pewglobal.org/interactives/climate-concern/.

25 Heidi Grasswick, "Climate Change Science and Responsible Trust: A Situated Approach." *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014): 553.

26 See also Lorraine Code, "Culpable Ignorance?." *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2013).

what Sinnott-Armstrong concludes. Instead, I believe we can find a path forward by returning to an examination of the moral nature of climate change itself. In doing so, I seek to chart a path for moving beyond the fit problem between the causal liability model and the question of individual obligations concerning climate change. My aim is thus to consider what alternative models of moral obligation—specifically ones not based in the phenomenology of agency that Scheffler highlights—can begin to answer the call from Jamieson and Gardiner to rethink our moral concepts given the challenge that climate change poses. To do so, I first examine how specific phenomenological features of climate change challenge our capacities as moral agents and in turn undermine the applicability of the causal liability model.

An initial challenge results from the nature of the scientific inquiry involved in studying climate change. Climate science is empirical and inductive and as such involves a certain level of uncertainty, which is typically viewed as an asset of scientific inquiry. However, the experience of uncertainty takes on a problematic dimension in this context. For example, when the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) makes predictions about future climate impacts, it does so in the language of "likelihood" or by expressing various levels of "confidence" in its findings. Social psychologists Ezra Markowitz and Azim Shariff note that when non-scientists read IPCC reports, "respondents… systematically interpret the outcomes [described in the reports] as less likely than intended by the experts."[27] When considering an undesirable outcome or a conclusion that may require uncomfortable changes in one's own day to day life (as is the case with climate change), respondents tend to focus on the small chance that the climate harms deemed "likely" will not come to fruition. This research demonstrates a tendency to experience perceived uncertainty concerning climate change in an overly optimistic fashion.

A second challenge for utilizing the causal liability model emerges from the experience of climate change as a physical phenomenon. Climate change is spatially diffused and temporally dispersed. Carbon emissions do not stay in one place; they disperse into the atmosphere, accumulate, and create increased climate variability in various places. Many of those who have contributed to the existing quantity of CO_2 in the atmosphere are no longer alive. In this way, the effects of climate change are, as Gardiner notes, "seriously backloaded" and "substantially

27 Ezra M. Markowitz and Azim F. Shariff, "Climate Change and Moral Judgement." *Nature Climate Change* 2, no. 4 (2012): 243–247.

deferred."[28] The effects that we feel now are the result of past emissions and "the cumulative effects of our current emissions will not be realized for some time in the future."[29] Whereas climate change is experienced as a prolonged and dispersed phenomenon, the moral intuitions that typically motivate action tend to take the form of "rapid, emotional visceral reactions" to immediate stimuli.[30] Temporal dispersion incentivizes current generations, who benefit from resisting the financial burdens of mitigation efforts, to avoid dealing with climate change. According to Markowitz and Shariff, those who will be affected by the future effects of climate change are, at best, perceived as less similar to oneself than one's contemporaries and, at worst, as "out-group members" without moral standing.[31] Jamieson notes how the spatial and temporal features of climate change make it "difficult to identify the agents and the victims or the causal nexus that obtains between them," which is why, as I have also argued here, "it is difficult for the network of moral concepts (for example, responsibility, blame, and so forth) to gain traction."[32] In considering an individual's experience of themselves as contributors to climate change, the spatial diffusion and temporal dispersion between causes and effects seriously thwart the identification of specific causes of harm under the causal liability model.

A third challenge results from how we experience the impacts of climate change. Climate change related harms are differentially distributed. It effects different people in different places in different ways. While the immediate impacts of increased climate variability may only cause minor inconveniences for those who are relatively affluent and well equipped for adaptation, others face catastrophic circumstances ranging from sea level rise and drought to unexpected changes in weather patterns. Gardiner refers to these impacts as the "skewed vulnerabilities" created by climate change and reminds us that those who are most likely to suffer the worst impacts of climate change often lack the power and resources to hold higher emitting states responsible for their contributions.[33] Emerging sociological research continues to highlight the differential impacts of climate change, including focuses on how racial,

28 Stephen Gardiner, "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics, and the Problem of Moral Corruption." in *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, ed. Stephen Gardiner et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91.

29 Gardiner, 91.

30 Markowitz and Shariff, "Climate Change and Moral Judgement." 244.

31 Markowitz and Shariff, 245.

32 Jamieson, "Climate Change, Responsibility, and Justice." 436.

33 Gardiner, "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics, and the Problem of Moral Corruption." 90.

gender, and class based differences skew individual's specific experiences of climate change and its related harms.[34]

A final challenge results from the fact that the causes of climate change exist at multiple levels of agency and, as a result, the question of precisely who (or what) we should focus on when we look to assign moral obligations for climate change is unclear. Individuals are just one level of agency that we might focus on. Nation states, corporations, international institutions, and cities (all made up of collections of individuals) must be part of the conversation concerning mitigation. Determining which level of agency ought to be the primary focus of moral concern is, as a result, an open issue. Much of the literature in climate ethics focuses on the role of nation-state and international institutions.[35] Sinnott-Armstrong's own argument concludes by shifting focus onto governments as the bodies on which environmentalists ought to place their focus.[36]

Chris Cuomo has demonstrated how environmental campaigns that focus on individual agency, through greener living strategies (e.g., switching one's light bulbs, carpooling, etc.) are problematic. Such campaigns, Cuomo explains, remove attention from the responsibilities of larger scale agents with the power to make a substantial difference in overall GHG emissions. Cuomo notes that even "if a miracle were to occur and all automobile use was replaced by carbon-neutral transportation, larger-scale reductions that can only be achieved by meta-level emitters such as corporations and governments would still be necessary to avert climate disaster."[37] Focusing only on individual agency reinforces a rhetoric of personal responsibility that shifts attention to largely ineffective changes and avoids conversations about the structural and institutional changes needed for effective mitigation. What kind of moral obligations individuals, especially those living in high-emitting states, have in light of the fact that their lifestyle changes alone affect little change is a difficult question. It is not surprising that, given these real-

34 Irene Dankelman, *Gender and Climate Change: An Introduction* (Washington, DC: Routledge, 2010); Seema Arora-Jonsson, "Virtue and Vulnerability: Discourses on Women, Gender and Climate Change." *Global Environmental Change* 21, no. 2 (2011): 744–51.

35 See, for example, Peter Singer, "One Atmosphere." in *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Paul Baer, "Who Should Pay for Climate Change? 'Not Me'." *Chicago Journal of International Law* 13, no. 2 (2013); Simon Caney, "Cosmopolitan Justice, Responsibility, and Global Climate Change." in *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, ed. Stephen Gardiner et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

36 Simon Caney argues for individual obligations to influence political leaders as "second order" responsibilities concerning climate change. See Simon Caney, "Two Kinds of Climate Justice: Avoiding Harm and Sharing Burdens: Two Kinds of Climate Justice." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2014): 125–49.

37 Chris J. Cuomo, "Climate Change, Vulnerability, and Responsibility." *Hypatia* 26, no. 4 (2011): 701.

izations about individual's influence, many might simply conclude that individuals have no such obligations. What is required (if it is possible) is a model of individual moral obligation that can better take into account these specific challenges inherent to the experience of climate change.

6. Climate Change, Social Justice, and Shared Responsibility

The focus of this paper has been to explore the problems raised by applying the casual liability model to cases in which individual GHG emissions (e.g., a Sunday joy-ride) contribute to climate change. Sinnott-Armstrong and Hiller focus on whether or not individual actions cause harm in order to determine whether individuals have moral obligations to refrain from GHG emitting behavior. I argue that even if we accept that individual contributions to climate change cause a quantifiable harm, this is not sufficient for making a strong determination of individual moral obligations in this context. Many of the everyday behaviors that contribute to climate change lack other features that commonly accompany straightforward determinations of an individual's obligations (e.g., discreetly connected causes and effects, intentionality, unusualness, etc.). I am not suggesting that this morally excuses individuals for climate change, but it at minimum brings our attention to the existence of a fit problem concerning the causal liability model and the challenges posed by climate change.

What I have constructed is an account of why climate change is ill conceived as a use case for the casual liability model. Given the existence of strong psychological temptations to avoid changing one's lifestyle to mitigate climate change (especially when a single individual's efforts do not result in tangible gains), a weak attribution of individual obligation will not suffice in this case. In this last section, I suggest that when thinking about how individuals are morally implicated in the harms produced by climate change, it is best to focus climate change as a matter of social justice. I then briefly consider two paths for understanding individual moral obligations as a matter of shared responsibility, both of which have grown out of attempts to articulate individual moral obligations in light of other social justice issues.

As I have argued, climate change is not well explained as merely the result of easily identifiable, discreet causes and effects that take place within individual interactions. The causal liability model is, therefore, a poor fit for understanding the moral obligations of individual who contribute to climate change. This phenomenon is also not best explained as merely a matter of failed collective responsibilities, since there is no

single, organized, and intentional collective body that causes climate change.[38] Although the policies of certain collective bodies (such as nation states) can have a large impact on future GHG emissions, a focus on the obligations of political bodies is not exhaustive of the many ways in which climate change is produced. Moreover, when high emitting nation states fail to address climate change, it is productive to reflect back on the moral obligations of those who ultimately make up these bodies (i.e., individuals). The causal agency that creates climate change is as diffused and dispersed as climate change itself. Climate change is caused by a collection of past, present, and future actors (some organized into collective bodies and some not), continuing down an unsustainable path of environmental degradation. At the level of individual contribution, what produces climate change are largely unintentional acts, comprised of the unsustainable life practices of numerous individuals going about their everyday lives.

In light of these characteristics of how climate change is produced, I suggest that a fruitful way to explore individual moral obligations for climate change is to first recognize that in addition to being an environmental or technical problem, climate change is also a matter of social justice. Climate change is a matter of social justice insofar as the harms that it produces result from basic social, economic, and political arrangements.[39] Social expectations concerning energy usage, the interests of fuel industries, transportation infrastructure, fuel efficiency standards, and contemporary political interests all set the backdrop in which individual GHG consumption takes place. While individual contributions are a cause of climate change, so are these structural features of societies. The affects that are ultimately produced, whether in the form of sea level rise or susceptibility to high intensity weather patterns, significantly impacts people's life prospects by distributing advantages to some and disadvantages to others based upon one's social positioning. As such, the effects of climate change reinforce and potentially create new inequalities. How to evaluate individual GHG emissions then is a not a mere question of environmental responsibility, but rather a matter of how to understand an individual's role in a large scale, complex social justice issue.

38 Tracy Isaacs, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

39 This assertion is based in a Rawlsian formulation of the subject of social justice as the basic structure of social, political, and economic arrangements, specifically focusing on the idea that these structures significantly shape life prospects given one's social position. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), 6.

Larry May and Iris Young have developed models of shared responsibility to articulate individual obligations in light of issues like racism and global labor injustice. Injustices caused by these issues are, like climate change, not merely the result of individual interactions (although many harmful individual actions along with social, economic, and political policies make up the conditions for the possibility of these harms). Models of shared responsibility depart from individual and collective models of moral obligation insofar as they focus on distributing obligations within disorganized groups of actors.[40] This focus is useful given the multiple levels of agency that contribute to social justice issues. A model of shared responsibility for climate change would allow for the distribution of some portion of responsibility to our Sunday joyrider, without inaccurately claiming that the full criteria of the causal liability model are satisfied by this agent's actions. May and Young both employ their own versions of a model of shared responsibility, and I look to their models to highlight two avenues through which we might attribute some degree of moral obligation to the Sunday joyrider. These alternative ways of conceiving of moral obligations for the Sunday joyrider can also ground some of the content of the initial intuition that drives Sinnott-Armstrong's investigation, i.e., that unnecessary use of GHG emission is morally problematic.

While May focuses on obligations concerning racist attitudes, Young focuses on the way in which social connections to unjust labor practices (e.g., through the buying of fast fashion) produce obligations to address harms. In *Sharing Responsibility*, May argues that individuals can be morally implicated in harms that happen in their communities, even when they do not directly cause these harms. Shared responsibility issues, at least in part, from the adoption of attitudes "one can be reasonably expected to change when it is understood that they are likely to be productive of harm.[41] On May's account, individuals who adopt racists attitudes are to some extent responsible for racist violence that happens within their communities, since these attitudes support a context in which racist violence is able to persist. Those who share in these attitudes are certainly not as responsible for the violence as the actual perpetrators, but their attitudes, May suggests, warrant some attribution of blame because it contributes to an environment in which this kind of violence is tolerated. To connect this analysis to the case of climate change, the Sunday joyrider may be seen as sharing in responsibility for harms relating to climate change insofar as his or her contributions to climate change display an attitude of indifference to the long-term and

40 Larry May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.

41 May, 6.

distant effects of GHG emissions. The joyrider's indifference in effect helps to maintain social, economic, and political structures that, taken together, continue down the path of anthropogenic climate change. For example, a widespread climate of indifference among citizens of a high emitting country makes politicians unlikely to implement policies that curb GHG emissions.

Seeking to investigate moral obligations concerning individual involvement in global labor injustice (e.g., through the purchase of clothing produced by sweatshops), Young crafts her own model of shared responsibility called the social connection model. Young argues that some "obligations of justice arise between persons by virtue of the social processes that connect them," specifically obligations to remedy harms that result from "structural social injustice."[42] On Young's view, individuals have a moral obligation to remedy harms based upon the social positions that they inhabit, especially when their position is mediated by complex social, economic, and political structures that benefit them while disadvantaging others. Young's social connection model is a shared model of responsibility insofar as it aims to distribute responsibility to the many actors (individuals and institutions) that contribute to social injustice. For example, individuals, companies, and government agencies, who are socially connected to injustice in the global apparel industry share, for Young, responsibility for these harms. What differentiates Young's social connection model from a causal liability model is that it is forward looking; it maintains that agents who participate in social injustice have positive obligations to address these harms. The social connection model is disinterested in the blame assigning function of the causal liability model and instead highlights obligations to participate in collective action to transform unjust social structures. In this way, Young's model aims to avoid the defensive responses to practices of blame, and instead attempts to assign positive obligations in ways that are responsive to the actual capacities and positions of individuals.[43]

To apply this model to the case of the Sunday joy rider would take account of ways in which the ultimate effects of GHG emissions are significantly structured by the social position that an agent inhabits, i.e., the model would recognize how GHG emissions contribute to harm due, in part, to factors beyond the control of any individual agent (i.e., that others also choose to emit, limited options for energy consumption and transportation, etc.). This model then would posit the existence of posi-

42 Iris Marion Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 23, no. 1 (2006): 102.

43 For more on Young's social connection model, see Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

tive obligations to transform those structures in cases where those social arrangements advantage of some at the expense of others, while being attentive to the ways in which individuals' social positions make them more or less susceptible to climate change harms. The Sunday joyrider is connected to the harms of anthropogenic climate change through his or her use of GHGs. Sharing in responsibility for these harms, under the social connection model, involves taking on obligations to transform the various institutions that structure individual acts in ways that necessarily harm others.

7. Conclusion

Sinnott-Armstrong crafts the Sunday joyrider example to investigate the intuition that individuals are in some way obligated to refrain from producing excess GHG emissions. What ensues is a debate with Hiller regarding the causal role played by individual GHG emissions on the overall impacts of climate change. In this paper, I have argued for the existence of a fit problem in standard ways of thinking about individual responsibility and climate change, specifically that the causal liability model's paradigmatic use case of individuals harming others in small scale interactions does not hold for individuals in their everyday experience of contributing to climate change. Responding to this fit problem, I suggest that addressing the question of individual moral obligations concerning climate change must begin with an examination of the moral nature of climate change itself. I argue that climate change is best understood as a matter of social justice and suggest that a model of shared responsibility may be fruitful for investigating whether or not individuals, like the Sunday joyrider, are morally obligated to curb their contributions to climate change. This discussion of shared responsibility is not intended to offer a conclusive solution, but rather to provide an avenue for further exploration. By looking to models based in attitudinal and socially connected moral obligations, I identify two possible paths for articulating individual moral obligations concerning climate change.

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Indywidualne zobowiązania, zmiany klimatyczne i współodpowiedzialność

Abstrakt

Skuteczne przeciwdziałanie zmianom klimatycznym okazało się trudne, mimo że wpływ rosnącej zmienności klimatu stał się bardziej widoczny. W tym artykule rozważam istnienie indywidualnych zobowiązań moralnych dotyczących zmian klimatu. Poprzez dołączenie do dyskusji Waltera-Sinnotta-Armstronga i Avrama Hillera na temat moralnego znaczenia emisji gazów cieplarnianych na poziomie indywidualnym, diagnozuję zasadniczy problem, jaki istnieje w dostosowywaniu naszych zwyczajnych sposobów myślenia o indywidualnych zobowiązaniach moralnych (co nazywam modelem odpowiedzialności przyczynowej) do etycznych wyzwań związanych ze zmianą klimatu. W świetle owego problemu twierdzę, że kwestię indywidualnych zobowiązań moralnych dotyczących zmian klimatu należy poprzedzić analizą natury zmian klimatu jako problemu moralnego. Twierdzę, że biorąc pod uwagę pewne cechy, zmiany klimatyczne są zagadnieniem z zakresu sprawiedliwości społecznej i sugeruję, że model współodpowiedzialności oferuje możliwość rozwoju w artykulacji indywidualnych zobowiązań w tym kontekście.

Słowa kluczowe: zmiany klimatyczne, zobowiązania moralne, współodpowiedzialność, postawy, obojętność

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centrowane są na pytaniu o moralną odpowiedzialność w kontekście globalnym, szczególnie w obliczy indywidualnych zobowiązań jakie mają poszczególne osoby, skonfrontowane z złożonymi społecznymi i środowiskowymi problemami, takimi jak zmiany klimatyczne.

Individual Obligations, Climate Change, and Shared Responsibility

Summary

Effectively addressing climate change has proven to be intractable, even as the impacts of increased climate variability have become more prominent. In this paper, I consider the existence of individual moral obligations regarding climate change. Through an engagement with Walter-Sinnott-Armstrong and Avram Hiller's debate concerning the moral significance of individual level GHG emissions, I diagnose a fit problem that exists in the application of our ordinary ways of thinking about individual moral obligations (what I call the causal liability model) to the ethical challenges of climate change. In light of this fit problem, I argue that the question of individual moral obligations concerning climate change should be preceded by an analysis the nature of climate change as a moral problem. I argue that, given certain features, climate change is a matter of social justice and suggest that models of shared responsibility offer a path forward for articulating individual obligations in this context.

Key words: climate change, moral obligation, shared responsibility, attitudes, indifference

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