



Individual Responsibility for Collective Climate Change Harms

Adriana Placani

To cite this article: Adriana Placani (02 May 2024): Individual Responsibility for Collective Climate Change Harms, Ethics, Policy & Environment, DOI: [10.1080/21550085.2024.2347812](https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2024.2347812)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2024.2347812>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 02 May 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 253



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Individual Responsibility for Collective Climate Change Harms

Adriana Placani 

Nova Institute of Philosophy, Nova University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This work employs Elizabeth Cripps' collectivist account of responsibility for climate change in order to ground an individual duty to reduce one's GHG emissions. This is significant not only as a critique of Cripps, but also as an indication that even on some collectivist footings, individuals can be assigned primary duties to reduce their emissions. Following Cripps, this work holds the unstructured group of GHG emitters weakly collectively responsible for climate change harms. However, it argues against Cripps that what follows from this is a corresponding collective duty to act qua group to bring about an end to the harm and a derivative duty for each emitter to promote the required organization of a group capable of this. Instead, this work argues that acts of GHG emission, to the extent that they are avoidable and performed with requisite knowledge, make one into a member of a group that is morally responsible for climate-related harms. Thus, individual emitters who can do otherwise should recognize themselves as members of a group that collectively harms. Subsequently, they should take all possible steps in order to renounce their membership (e.g. by reducing their GHG emissions).

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 March 2023
Accepted 11 April 2024

KEYWORDS

Climate change; individual responsibility; collective harm; Elizabeth Cripps; collective responsibility

Introduction

Individual agents should do many things, but averting the harms of climate change is not one of them. This is partly because no single individual could possibly avert (or cause) such harms by themselves. Both causing and averting the harms of climate change requires joint or collective action. This is one of the basic, albeit rough, intuitive thoughts behind some collectivists' accounts (e.g. Cripps, Isaacs, Sinnott-Armstrong) who claim that duties to avert climate change harms are primarily collective. This work undermines such claims by employing Cripps' (2013) collectivist account of responsibility in order to ground an individual duty to reduce one's GHG emissions.

The first part of this work lays down foundational issues that allow for the subsequent ethical treatment of climate change and responsibility for it. The second part offers an introduction to Cripps' (2013) account as a viable option for addressing these matters. On the basis of Cripps' (2013) conception, this section identifies the unstructured group of GHG emitters as weakly collectively responsible for climate change harm inasmuch as this

CONTACT Adriana Placani  adrianaplacani@fchsh.unl.pt  Nova Institute of Philosophy, Nova University of Lisbon, Avenida de Berna 26C, 1069-061 Lisbon, Portugal

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

putative group can be identified as the cause of reasonably foreseeable and avoidable climate change harms. However, section three of this work argues against Cripps that what follows from this is a corresponding collective duty to act *qua* group to bring about an end to the harm and a derivative duty for each emitter to promote the required organization of such a group. Instead, this work emphasizes that acts of GHG emission, to the extent that they are avoidable and performed with requisite knowledge, make one into a member of a group that is morally responsible for climate-related harm. Thus, individual emitters who can do otherwise, which means not emit at reasonable cost to themselves, should recognize themselves as members of a group that collectively harms and take all possible steps in order to cease such membership (e.g. by reducing their GHG emissions).

Consequently, this work argues that what follows from Cripps' account of weakly collective responsibility for emitters is a personal duty that falls on each individual member of the group to renounce membership in it by, primarily, reducing their GHG emissions to the extent possible. The conclusions of this work are important not only as criticism of a prominent collectivist account of responsibility for climate change, but also because they signify that even on collectivist grounds, which emphasize the collective nature of climate change and the inefficacy of individuals, individuals can still be assigned primary duties to reduce personal emissions.

Climate Change and Non-Maleficence

That climate change is primarily caused by human activity is well established.¹ That climate change will cause serious harms is also well established. Given the clear, albeit complex, causal link between anthropogenic climate change and harm, this work will ground its arguments about individual responsibility on the basis of a general duty of non-maleficence.² Here, this is interpreted as a *prima facie* duty not to cause foreseeable and reasonably avoidable harm. The defense of this duty cannot be undertaken in the scope of this work, yet this duty should be uncontroversial.

Although this essay will not devote much space to showing why the duty of non-maleficence should be used to frame moral problems of climate change, such as the assignation of individual responsibility, it offers several reasons why it is appropriate. First, that climate change is harmful rests on findings from reports by the IPCC (2007, 2014, 2018). Such findings point to the fact that not only *will* human-induced climate change have profound negative impacts on significant interests of human (and non-human) life, but also that some such negative impacts can *already* be ascertained. Such negative impacts favor making use of the duty of non-maleficence in moral theorizing about individual responsibility and duties for anthropogenic climate change. If the case can be made that individuals have already violated this duty, then assignations of blame-worthiness and remedial duties may be grounded on this basis. Furthermore, it is clear that both the likelihood and incidence of harm will only grow as we move into the future, which speaks in favor of using a duty not to harm that stresses the latter's foreseeability.

The second reason for invoking the duty of non-maleficence when discussing our current responsibilities and duties for climate change harms lies in its formulation, which stresses not only foreseeability, but also the reasonable avoidability of harm. We can interpret the latter as entailing both: (1) a subjective avoidability, whereby what one

sacrifices in order to avoid the harm may be reasonably demanded of them (I call this subjective because it depends on personal circumstances); (2) an objective avoidability, whereby it is actually possible to avoid the harm. With regard to (2), given the dynamics of climate change, harms related to it are likely to become less and less avoidable as time passes. The evidence suggesting that harms have already occurred points to the fact that the duty may have already been violated, which could ground blameworthiness for those harms that could have been reasonably avoided. Nonetheless, it seems that at least some climate change harms can still be avoided. With regard to (1), subjective avoidability is a thorny problem that will feature in discussion later.

Weakly Collective Responsibility

It may be accepted that we have a duty of non-maleficence, i.e. a duty not to cause foreseeable and reasonably avoidable harm. It may also be accepted that climate change causes such harms. However, it is far from clear who violates the duty of non-maleficence in the climate change case and who has a duty to do something about it.

The reason is because climate change seems to be a collective problem in part brought about by billions of actions of GHG emissions that taken individually are neither necessary nor sufficient to cause climate change harms. Rather, manifold individual actions of GHG emission contribute, often imperceptibly, to a causal chain that is expected to result in harm (Vanderheiden 2007, p. 85). Thus, anthropogenic climate change harm appears to be caused by a lot of people acting, but with no one seemingly making a difference. As Nefsky (2015) puts it, take a single driver of the road and the problem of climate change will be just as bad (245).

Indeed, climate change is often described as a collective harm problem (Hormio, 2023). In a collective harm problem, agents act in a way that, collectively, causes harm or fails to prevent harm, but no individual act seems to make a difference to this on its own (Hormio, 2023; Nefsky 2019). The sizable literature around this issue pinpoints the puzzle of collective harm as that of identifying any moral reason for individuals to act otherwise or refrain from acting when they make no difference to the outcome (e.g. Cripps, 2013, Cullity, 2015, Hormio, 2023, Nefsky 2019, Sandberg 2011, Spiekermann 2014). Thus, if individual actions appear to have no effect on an outcome, it is difficult to see why individuals might have climate-related duties with respect to it (Hormio, 2023).

Many climate ethicists view climate change as a collective harm problem, and this has led them to focus on collective duties (e.g. Cripps, 2013, Cullity, 2015, Isaacs, 2011, Pinkert 2018, Sandberg 2011, Wringe 2020). This is because if no individual can be said to make a difference to harm, then the duty to address harm would seem to fall onto groups because they *can* make a difference (Hormio, 2023). Absent a collective agent that can fulfill this duty, individuals acquire duties to organize themselves and form a group that can fulfill the duty.

Arguing precisely in this vein, Elizabeth Cripps (2013) claims that even unstructured groups without any form of organization have a weakly collective duty to address collective harms such as climate change, which is grounded in their weakly collective responsibility for such harms. What follows from the unfulfilled weakly collective duty is a primary duty for individual members to promote collective action that can address the harms of climate change.

Cripps' ascription of weakly collective responsibility is an expanded notion of collective responsibility that requires explication. Cripps defends a weak form of collective responsibility, according to which a number of individuals, which are said to form a putative group, can be collectively responsible for harm that results from the predictable aggregation of their individual acts, even if there is no intention to harm or even to act collectively (Cripps, 2013, p. 172). The kind of putative group that Cripps has in mind lacks any formal recognition, decision-making structure or defined common goals.³

Cripps' weakly collective responsibility claim is the following:

A number of individuals who do not yet constitute a collectivity (either formally, with an acknowledged decision-making structure, or informally, with some vaguely defined common interest or goal) can be held collectively morally responsible for serious harm (fundamental interest deprivation) which has been caused by the predictable aggregation of avoidable individual actions. (2013, p. 69)

Further, Cripps identifies three sufficient conditions that, when fulfilled, trigger the ascription of weakly collective responsibility. They are: (1) the individuals acted such that, in aggregate, they caused harm, and they were aware (or could reasonably be expected to have foreseen) that this would happen; (2) individuals were all aware (or could reasonably be expected to have foreseen) that there were enough others similarly placed such that, when combined, their actions would bring about harm; (3) the contributory actions were avoidable at less than comparable cost to the individuals (Cripps, 2013, p. 69). Membership in a group weakly collectively responsible for harm obtains once an individual's contribution exceeds the amount such that, were everyone contributing only to that level, there would be no harm (Cripps, 2013, p. 73).⁴

Thus, Cripps argues that a number of individuals who do not constitute a collectivity can be grouped together and held collectively morally responsible for climate change harm caused by the predictable aggregation of their avoidable individual actions. She frames the primary corresponding duty to tackle climate change as a collective one. In turn, individuals may be required to fulfill derivative individual duties, which are, primarily, promotional duties to bring about collective schemes or institutions that are capable of addressing the harm. The picture Cripps presents suggests a mitigated individual involvement in discharging the duty to avoid the harms of climate change. Instead of curtailing their GHG emissions, for example, individual duties are, principally, those of promoting the organization of a collective effort to address climate change due, partly, to the latter's superior efficiency.

Following Cripps, this work identifies the unstructured group of GHG emitters as an appropriate candidate for weakly collective responsibility for climate change harms inasmuch as this putative group can be identified as the cause of reasonably foreseeable and avoidable climate change harms and members of it fulfill the conditions of Cripps' account.⁵ Members of the group of GHG emitters are those whose greenhouse gas emissions are higher than those at which, were everyone to emit at that level, climate change would be made no worse and could also avoid emitting without sacrificing fundamental interests (Cripps, 2013, p. 22). While affirming these aspects of Cripps' model of weakly collective responsibility, the following will argue against her position vis-à-vis the corresponding duties that follow from it.

Individual Duties for Collective Harms

The main claim of this section is that what follows from the putative group of GHG emitters being held as weakly collectively responsible for climate change harms is a personal duty that falls on each member to dissociate themselves from the group and, thusly, from the harm perpetrated by it. This is not to deny that individuals may and do have other duties (e.g. *inter alia* promotional duties). However, the duty of non-maleficence is the more stringent one, and, on its basis, individuals' primary duty is to stop participating in harm.

The following example of a group of straphangers is meant to be an obviously imperfect, but still useful analogy to the group of GHG emitters who bear weakly collective responsibility for climate change harms in accordance with Cripps' account. As such, this example will stick closely to Cripps' conditions for weakly collective responsibility presented before. The example is also meant to work as an intuition pump with regard to an individual's duties in the face of a collectively produced harm.

There are 10 strangers in a subway car. They each cling for support to one of the straps available. Unbeknownst to them the pressure they exert in so doing slowly tightens a rope around an innocent's neck. The mechanism connecting the individual straps to the rope is such that each strap-hanging action adds an indiscernible amount of weight, but, combined, this creates harmful and growing pressure. At some point on their ride, the strangers see their reflection in the subway car's window and realize what is happening. What should the straphangers do? What is the basic duty of these individuals?

The intuition seems clear: once individuals become aware of the facts, they should let go of the straps if they can.⁶ Would this change if there were 1000, 1 million or 1 billion straphangers in the subway car? Numbers are not morally significant in and of themselves, and, crucially, no one in isolation is necessary or sufficient for either the creation or averting of harm. This means that if in the original example of 10 straphangers each individual ought to let go of the straps, having more individuals in the subway car should not change this. This is because any individual added to the original 10 would be in the same causal and moral relationship to the collective harm as the original straphangers. Each individual performs an action that is a constitutive, albeit neither necessary nor sufficient, part of the whole that harms, which, when certain knowledge conditions obtain, has normative implications. Namely, if an individual knows or should know that their actions are part of a collection of actions resulting in harm, they have a conditional duty to cease performing them to the extent that this is possible.

In accordance with Cripps, the group of straphangers bears weakly collective responsibility for the harm produced because the three conditions of her account are met: (1) the straphangers acted such that, in aggregate, they caused harm, and they were aware of this; (2) the straphangers were all aware that there were enough others similarly placed such that, when combined, their actions would bring about harm; (3) the straphangers' contributory actions were avoidable at less than comparable cost to them. Thus, following Cripps, the straphangers' group is the one responsible for harm.

However, the straphangers' group cannot itself (i.e. *qua* group) stop the harm just like it could not itself (i.e. *qua* group) cause the harm. This is because the straphangers' group is not a collective agent that can act. It is nothing more than its individual members. The sense of responsibility that can be ascribed to the group is *weakly* collective because the

group is not a genuine one. The 'weak' part of weak collective responsibility in Cripps' account refers to the group and not to the responsibility born by it. What this means is that the duty to stop the harm falls on individual members because it is their actions in the aggregate that caused it. In other words, it is the members of the group who need to stop their contributions to harm because the harm is the result of their contributions.

The duty to stop contributing to harm and to, in this way, relinquish membership in the group springs into life as soon as individuals become aware of the harm and their individual contributions to it. It also emerges if they ought to arrive at such recognition. Such recognition is not purely descriptive, but bears normative weight. The focus, then, should be on how individuals see or ought to see themselves as – connected parts of a whole that harms, and what follows, normatively, from this – an individual duty to renounce membership in the group.

Recognition of the sort described plays this normative role because, once it is attained, agents become aware of their actions and the moral significance of their actions. Such awareness can usher in the moral responsibility of agents given that the epistemic condition of responsibility is met. Traditionally, moral responsibility hinges on two individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: a control condition (also called freedom condition) and an epistemic condition (also called knowledge or mental condition) (Rudy-Hiller, 2022). It is presumed that the control condition obtains at least for some of the members. Furthermore, although there is a great deal of debate surrounding the content of the epistemic condition and even its requirement, controversy is usually around whether a lack of awareness is exculpatory and not on whether having awareness of the harmfulness or harmful consequences that predictably flow from one's actions carries normative weight. This is because once an agent knows that one's action will result in harm, it is fairly uncontroversial to say that they ought not to take that action when alternatives exist.

Moral responsibility obtains in the emitters' case just like in the straphangers' case because the knowledge condition can be met given that awareness of the harms of climate change is now widespread and partial control over ceasing contributions exists, at least, when it comes to those emissions that are not necessary for securing basic rights. Therefore, much like the straphangers, members of the putative group of GHG emitters should recognize themselves as co-creators of a group harm, and upon such recognition dissociate themselves from it. The primary individual duty of group members is to cease contributing to harm through their GHG emissions to the extent that they can do so.

This picture is complicated by the fact that recognition of one's membership in the harm-creating group of emitters will likely not happen simultaneously for all. Some will gain awareness sooner, some later, and some never. This is acknowledged, but does not threaten the previous claims. Those who lack awareness, and are not culpably ignorant, are not part of the group that is collectively morally responsible, but they are part of the group that is causally responsible.

The group is flexible, being neither a fixed entity nor a formal one. The size of the group ebbs and flows with the awareness that putative group members gain or ought to gain of theirs and others' actions and any subsequent moves of disassociation. What is important is that the (actual or normative) recognition of one's own participation, others' participation, and the combined effects of participation, should serve to trigger one's individual duty to renounce participation.

The individual duty to renounce participation (and thus, membership) arises out of a collectivized duty of non-maleficence that distributes down to each individual that participates in the combined production of harm and is either aware or culpably unaware. Although it is the group that violates the duty of non-maleficence, this does not translate into a genuine collective duty on the part of the group as such (i.e. *qua* group) to cease its activities. Rather, the duty distributes down to the members. Again, this is because the group is not genuinely collective. This is what Cripps herself has in mind when assigning *weak* collective responsibility to the putative group of GHG emitters. However, if the collective responsibility charge is to be taken seriously, then what follows from it is the individual members' duty to renounce their membership (e.g. by reducing their emissions).

Consider the alternative. We could regard the group *qua* group to be morally responsible and the corresponding duty to be collective. This, however, is an impossibility. The reason for this is that the attribution of moral responsibility to collectives as such demands that there actually be a collective agent that is not identified by mere aggregation of individual agents (Giubilini & Levy, 2018). In other words, a group that can be properly ascribed moral responsibility *qua* group must have its own distinctive ontological status – distinct, that is, from the mere aggregation of individual identities (Giubilini & Levy, 2018). Moreover, the group itself would have to be the sort of entity that is a genuine moral agent with the capacity to respond to moral reasons and act on their basis. This position assumes an ontological reduction of (at least some) groups to sets of individuals. Philosophers (e.g. Copp, 2006, List & Pettit, 2011, Hindriks, 2013) who oppose the ontological reductionism of collectives use the example of structured groups to argue against this. However, in the case of both the straphangers and the putative group of GHG emitters their arguments have no traction.⁷ This is because the usual grounds for genuine collectivity (e.g. intentions that are group or we-based, shared attitudes, joint actions, plural subjects, a decision-making structure) are not available as recourse.

Requirements for collective agency are missing in the case of the straphangers and the putative group of GHG emitters. Note that Cripps' conditions for weakly collective responsibility refer exclusively to individuals and the aggregation of their individual actions' effects.⁸ As such, the reducibility of the collective to the individual is built into the very definition of the group that is Cripps' concern. The claim defended by Cripps (2013) stipulates that: 'a number of individuals who do not yet constitute a collectivity ... can be held morally collectively responsible for a harm which has been caused by the predictable aggregation of individual actions' (204). In other words, it is a number of individuals taken as a whole that is the candidate for collective moral responsibility, and not any collective entity as such. However, that means that the sense of collective that is at stake is just the collection of individual members in that collective. Again, this is because, in this case, no genuinely collective entity exists that could respond to moral reasons or act in accordance with duty. It is only the individuals comprising the collective that could do so.

In such cases, the collective character of moral responsibility is not a feature of a group as such, but of the multitude of individuals forming it. The outcome of the action of the putative group of GHG emitters is explained in terms of mere aggregation of individual behaviors, and therefore the collective character of responsibility in this case is reducible to an aggregation of individual behaviors (Cf. Isaacs 2006, p. 64). Such unstructured,

informal groups are basically the product of the predictability of individual actions combined and awareness thereof. Thus, any kind of collective moral responsibility that we can speak of in reference to such groups would ultimately boil down to the moral responsibility of individual members. For harm-creating groups like the straphangers and the putative group of GHG emitters, what follows is an individual duty to cease being a member in the group.

Ceasing membership in a group that harms can absolve one of responsibility for that group harm. In fact, the claim that responsibility ought not to be distributed to those group members who desist from or fight against their groups' harmful actions is one of the few areas of agreement among philosophers writing on collective responsibility (Smiley, 2023). For instance, Feinberg (1968), French (1998), McGary (1986), Moody-Adams (1994) all hold differing views, but they concur that it would be wrong to ascribe responsibility to those who desist or actively dissent from harmful group practices (Smiley, 2023). However, even though this is a likely and positive outcome, the reason to cease being a member in the cases considered is not just to avoid responsibility. As stated before, the reason to stop being a member in a group like the emitters is to stop being a part of the creation of harm. Given that the group of emitters is nothing more than its members, it is the members who are creating harm. Thus, it is the members who violate the duty of non-maleficence, which is the *prima facie* duty not to cause foreseeable and reasonably avoidable harm.

At this point, the 'no difference' problem should be confronted again as it may be unclear why individuals have a duty to reduce their GHG emissions. Given that the straphangers' case is meant to represent an imperfect analogy to climate change, the problem of inefficacy will be addressed in connection to the latter. Thus, in line with an inefficacy charge, the objection is that individual GHG emissions make no difference to the harms of climate change, which means that whether or not an individual reduces their personal emissions, the harms of climate change are the same. So, why should individuals reduce their emissions? And, in what sense is any individual a member of the group if no individual makes a difference to what the group does?⁹

To this, the first thing to note is the contentiousness of the claim that were one to reduce their GHG emissions, climate change harms would be the same. For example, Broome (2019) points out that the 'no difference' claim is empirically undermined by the complex nature of climatic changes and harms from such changes. He writes:

The atmosphere is a highly chaotic system, which means that a small disturbance at one time and place can escalate to cause very large disturbances in the weather all over the world just a few weeks later . . . Given the atmosphere's instability, we should expect global weather in a few decades' time to be entirely different if you go joyguzzling on Sunday from what it would have been had you stayed at home. (Broome 2019, 112–3)

Other authors, such as Nolt (2011), Hiller (2011) and Broome (2012) reject the view that one's individual act makes no difference on the basis of the quite consequential harmful impact of individuals' personal emissions over the course of a lifetime or as derived from lifetime emissions. For example, Broome (2012) gives a rough estimate that an individual's lifetime emissions will wipe out more than six months of healthy human life (74). Gunnemyr (2019) adopts a different strategy and argues that 'no difference' claims rely on the assumption that a simple counterfactual analysis of causation is correct, which is

problematic in the climate change case. Gunnemyr argues that on a more elaborated analysis of causation, such as Lewis (2000), it is indeterminate whether a single leisurely drive causes global warming.

Second, even if one agrees that individual emissions cannot make a difference by themselves, the literature on collective harm points to different strategies for assigning individual obligations on the basis of what the group is doing or should be doing (Nefsky 2019, p. 3).¹⁰ Going over all of these strategies would not be particularly helpful because the view that is under consideration here is the one from Cripps (2013). Cripps (2013) answer to the claim that an individual seems to have no reason to act in the face of inefficacy is to derive an individual obligation to act on the basis of an expanded notion of collective responsibility for harm that results predictably from aggregated, avoidable, individual actions.

Cripps argues that while individuals are not responsible for climate change harms because they make no difference, they are weakly collectively responsible for serious harm resulting predictably from their combined individual actions. This means that even if an individual makes no difference, she nevertheless acquires duties as a member of the group of emitters, which obtains when the weakly collective responsibility conditions are fulfilled and one's greenhouse gas emissions are higher than those at which, were everyone to emit at that level, climate change would be made no worse (Cripps, 2013, pp. 71–73).

On Cripps' view, then, the individual may not be personally responsible, but she is one of those collectively responsible (Cripps, 2013). On the basis of the weakly collective responsibility assignment to the unstructured putative group of emitters, correlative moral duties are assigned to individuals, which are, primarily, duties to play one's part in collective action to prevent the harm, and, in the absence of such collective action, duties to promote the collective action.

However, Cripps' answer is problematic. This is because, on the basis of their weakly collective responsibility, the putative group of GHG emitters is assigned a weakly collective duty to organize to mitigate and enable adaptation to climate change and compensate where such efforts come too late to prevent serious harm (2013, p. 22). The correspondence between the weakly collective responsibility and the weakly collective duty is assumed by Cripps as being a 'natural' one. She writes that 'in cases of weak collective responsibility, the primary corresponding duty is naturally a collective one: to do something about the harm together. That is, to act, qua group, to bring about an end to the harm' (2011, p. 175). Thus, for Cripps, the putative group of emitters is assigned a weakly collective duty on the basis of their weakly collective responsibility for climate change harms, and that which follows is an individual duty to promote the formation of an actual group that can fulfill the collective duty.

However, this perspective distorts the connection between the putative group of emitters and harm. On Cripps' view, it is as if the unstructured group is itself responsible for the harm, which could be plausible if this was an actual group capable of being responsible *qua* group. However, the emitters are not such a group. According to Cripps herself, the collective that is the bearer of responsibility is a set of individuals who do not yet constitute a group in a strong sense, but who are *grouped* by the predictable harmful effect of their combined actions (2011, p. 176). Cripps speaks of grouping individuals who meet relevant criteria, which makes sense given that the subject of analysis is not a formal

group that is recognized (2013, p. 69; 2011, p. 176 and 177). However, this means there is no group and certainly no group agent, only *grouped* members. The emitters are a set of individuals grouped in virtue of their actions and mental states in performing those actions. The group that harms is nothing more than the individuals who form it.

If the harm is perpetrated by individual emitters or, more accurately, if it predictably flows from their actions, then the claim that their primary duty is to promote collective action that can stop the harm seems dishonest. This is because it artificially creates a separation, in the form of the group, between what the emitters are doing themselves – harm – and their duties relative to that harm. In other words, it is as if someone else is perpetrating the harm, i.e. the group as such, even though there is no group as such.

The example of a broken dam, which is used by Cripps (2013, p. 144) to argue in favor of the primacy of promotional individual duties to create collective action over direct duties to cut emissions is telling. In this scenario, a dam has broken above a heavily populated area. The ensuing rush of water is causing more and more deaths. There are two possibilities espoused. One, through the concerted effort of bystanders the dam could be fixed, those already in the water could be rescued, and further harm could be prevented. Two, as individuals, the bystanders could rescue individual victims. Cripps argues that the first option is the clear choice because the collective-level duty of harm prevention can be most effectively, fairly and efficiently be fulfilled by individual duties to bring about collective action.

In addition to a dubious claim regarding the purported superior efficiency of individual promotional action given that these too can be inefficient, what is important here is that the dam example conceals the moral relationship between harm and the individual, and, in so doing, severs its analogy to climate change. Anthropogenic climate change harm is not a natural phenomenon that we are witnessing. There are almost no bystanders in the context of climate change. Rather, first and foremost, we, as emitters of GHG, are the perpetrators of climate change. Thus, the broken dam example could be adjusted so that, in addition to its core features, individuals are, at the same time, tearing down pieces of the dam, which would predictably lead to its ruin, causing more and more harm. In such a case, the primary duty of an individual who could do otherwise should be clear: stop tearing down the dam. It is also important to note that climate change is an incremental problem, which can be worsened by more emissions, which makes the individual duty to cut emissions all the more clear.

Given the above, even on Cripps' account, which is resolutely collectivist, individuals can be said to have a primary duty to reduce their GHG emissions given that this is the principal way of ceasing membership in the putative group of GHG emitters that bears weakly collective responsibility for climate change harms. This means that what is required from each individual is that they stop their GHG contributions to the extent that this is possible. The latter caveat is, of course, tricky. How far does the individual duty extend? Here, the concept of control, which is inextricably tied to the concept of moral responsibility, as well as Shue's (1993) distinction between luxury and subsistence emissions serve to outline one possible response.

Group members of the putative group of GHG emitters have partial relevant control over their emitting actions because many such emissions are not necessary for subsistence (i.e. securing basic rights, such as physical and economic security). It would be absurd to claim that a person has relevant control over stopping their GHG emissions

when these are requisites of human survival (i.e. subsistence emissions). Emissions that are not needed for securing basic rights, however, would fall into the category of luxury emissions. It is with respect to these emissions that an individual may be said to have relevant control over and for which an ascription of blameworthiness may be appropriate.

The line between subsistence and luxury is, however, blurry. Furthermore, there are views that advance a more expansive understanding of basic human rights, for example as claims to secure a decent life. Having a fundamental right to a decent life would involve also having a derivative right to those GHG emissions that are necessary to fulfilling or enjoying a decent standard of living (Baatz, 2014, Caney, 2009). For the purposes of a justifiable attribution of responsibility based on one's participation in the violation of a duty, such as the collectivized duty of non-maleficence, control serves to point toward a way out of such predicaments.

Having partial relevant control over one's action of GHG emitting triggers a possible justifiable ascription of moral responsibility for the action. Some emissions will clearly fall under the category of that which is needed for securing either subsistence or a decent standard of living. Others will clearly fall under the category of luxury emissions (e.g. a leisurely ride on one's private plane, a gas-guzzling Sunday drive). Yet others will fall somewhere in between. The point is that at least some emissions will be clearly prohibited. Just like in the straphangers' case, when alternatives exist, then one ought to take them. This may not be a full answer, but it is the start of one.

Subsequent to this initial foothold of weeding out clear-cut cases of luxury emissions from non-luxury ones, each individual should seek to do more, that is, they should seek to curb more and more of their emissions. The lines between emissions that are key ingredients of a decent life and those that are not may be blurry, but this is partly because they are not stagnant.

For instance, low-carbon alternatives are constantly being developed and made more affordable, which changes what we can reasonably be expected to do. The fact that an exact specification of the scope and scale of one's duty is unavailable should not be used as a pretext not to do what can be done. With the expansion of the boundaries of the latter, individual duties will become more capacious.

As Shue (2022) writes:

When there were no affordable alternatives to fossil fuels, there may have been a period in which an excuse of necessity applied to the infliction of the harms they caused. But those days are long gone, and the combustion of fossil fuels has now become in fact an "avoidable necessity" because alternative energy sources are readily affordable and increasingly accessible. (47)

This argument amplifies individual duties. To the extent that one can do otherwise (i.e. not emit GHG), then one may be held morally responsible (i.e. blameworthy) for emitting GHG. This bar will be situated differently for different individuals. It may not be reasonable for a poor individual from a poor country to stop certain emissions when these are produced in order to secure basic rights (e.g. to food, to shelter), but it will be for a well-off individual in a rich country who can switch to greener options. This is not to say that the individual duty stops here. Individuals may have many other duties besides curtailing their emissions, such as promoting collective action, supporting the development and adoption of low-carbon alternatives, or voting for candidates

with environmentally-minded agendas. The duty to limit one's own emissions does not exclude other duties.

A final remark concerns the possibility that there might be other ways of dissociation besides emissions reduction. The focus has been on harm and one's own partial creation of it as a member of a group, which is why it has been argued that the primary way of dissociation is severing the link between the individual and the harm-creating group. Arguably, however, this dissociation could occur through other mechanisms, such as offsetting one's carbon emissions. I have argued elsewhere that if carbon offsets work, then they can discharge our duty not to harm (Placani & Broadhead 2022, Broadhead & Placani, 2021). However, it is doubtful that this conditional is currently met (Greenfield, 2023). Still, if it were met, then such measures could be part of a solution toward distancing oneself from climate change harms, and one should remain open to this, as well as to any other alternative solutions.

Conclusion

This work has shown that even on collectivist grounds, individuals can be assigned primary duties to reduce their GHG emissions. Following Cripps (2013), this work held the unstructured group of GHG emitters weakly collectively responsible for harm resulting from the predictable aggregation of their individual acts. However, it argued against Cripps that what follows from this is a corresponding collective duty to act *qua* group to bring about an end to the harm and a derivative duty for each emitter to promote the required organization of a group capable of such a collective action. Instead, it was argued that acts of GHG emission, to the extent that they are avoidable and performed with requisite knowledge, make one into a member of a group that is morally responsible for climate-related harm. Individual emitters who can do otherwise (i.e. not emit at reasonable cost to themselves) should recognize themselves as members of a group that collectively harms. Subsequently, they should take all possible steps in order to cease such membership (e.g. by reducing their GHG emissions). Thus, this work has argued that what follows from assigning weakly collective responsibility to the putative group of GHG emitters as Cripps does, is a personal duty that falls on each individual member to renounce membership in this group.

To be clear, not all members of the putative group of GHG emitters are *ipso facto* blameworthy for climate change harms, but those who can, but do not, cease membership (e.g. by renouncing their luxury emissions) are. This way of framing the issue can acknowledge the collective nature of climate change harms, and yet rest duty and responsibility on individuals' shoulders.

Notes

1. See Attfield (1999); Gardiner (2004); Garvey (2008); Giddens (2009); Hulme (2009); Jamieson (2008) among others.
2. See W.D. Ross (1930, 2002).
3. Cripps' defense of such a group as a bearer of moral responsibility draws from Larry May's (1987, 1992) account of collective moral responsibility, but expands on it.

4. Singer (2002, p. 35) points out that residents of the US, Japan, and Western nations were already several times above this level by the start of the 21st century (Cripps, 2013, p. 220).
5. Note a minor difference between Cripps' account and this interpretation. Cripps (2013) calls the putative group of GHG emitters the Polluters and defines them as: 'The potential collectivity made up of those emitting greenhouse gases above the level at which, were all emitting at that level, climate change would not be worsened, and whose individual emissions over that level are avoidable without the loss to them of some fundamental interest emitters the latter seems a more exact cause of global warming' (Cripps, 2013, p. 203). For the purposes of this work, the putative group of GHG emitters and the Polluters are equivalent. The change was made because the label 'emitters' strikes as clearer and more straightforward, but the reader might disagree.
6. This does not deny that other duties exist (e.g. seek alternatives for those who cannot let go of the straps).
7. However, these collectives are not random either because they gather around the harms they bring about.
8. Recall the conditions of weak collective responsibility: 'the individuals acted in ways which, in aggregate, caused harm, and which they were aware (or could reasonably be expected to have foreseen) would, in aggregate, cause harm (although each only intentionally performed his own act); they were all aware (or could reasonably be expected to have foreseen) that there were enough others similarly placed (and so similarly motivated to act) for the combined actions to bring about the harm; and; the harm was collectively avoidable: by acting otherwise (which they could reasonably have done), the individuals making up the putative group could between them have avoided the harm' (Cripps, 2013, pp. 174–5).
9. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this.
10. For example, in cases where no individual action seems to make a difference, but, collectively individual actions cause morally significant outcomes, Parfit (1984, Chapter 3) argues that even if you do not make a difference yourself, your act can be wrong in virtue of being part of a group of acts that together makes a difference for the worse (Nefsky 2019, pp. 3–4). However, determining whether a certain act is part of the set of acts that together make a difference is highly problematic given that the act is stipulated to make no difference (Nefsky 2019). Further, even if we are able to determine who is in the difference-making set, why such membership matters remains unclear (Nefsky 2019). Kutz (2000) advances an account that aims to solve such problems. He puts forward the idea that participatory intentions allow us to hold individuals morally accountable for collective harm regardless of their causal contribution to it. This is because participatory intentions are intentions to do one's part of a collective act in order to realize a shared goal. The problem, of course, is that climate change is an example of an unstructured case of collective harm where emitters do not intend their actions as contributions to a shared goal. Kutz suggests we overcome this problem by regarding contributions to unstructured collective harm count as complicit because they amount to 'quasi-intentional' participation in a culturally harmful way of life. However, Zoller (2015) relies on recent cognitive science and phenomenology to argue that individuals are not connected to their 'way of life' in a way that could even count as 'quasi-intentional' (999), while Schwartz (2010) argues that Kutz's expanded conception of complicity is 'too vague to be useful' (79). For helpful overviews of these and other prominent accounts of collective harm, see Nefsky (2015, 2017, 2019). Nefsky also argues against these accounts and proposes her own solution to the problem, but does not discuss Cripps' views. For criticisms of Nefsky's account, see: Asker (2023), Fanciullo (2020) and Robertson (2021).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Adriana Placani's work is financed by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the Scientific Employment Stimulus - Individual Call - CEECIND/02135/2021.

ORCID

Adriana Placani  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3772-2571>

References

- Asker, A. (2023). The problem of collective impact: Why helping doesn't do the trick. *Philosophical Studies*, 180(8), 2377–2397. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-023-01995-7>
- Attfield, R. (1999). *The ethics of the global environment*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Baatz, C. (2014). Climate change and individual duties to reduce GHG emissions. *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 17(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2014.885406>
- Broadhead, S., & Placani, A. (2021). The morality of carbon offsets for luxury emissions. *World Futures*, 77(6), 405–417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02604027.2021.1969876>
- Broome, J. (2012). *Climate matters: Ethics in a warming world*. W. W. Norton.
- Broome, J. (2019). Against denialism. *The Monist*, 102(1), 110–129.
- Caney, S. (2009). Justice and the distribution of greenhouse gas emissions. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 5(2), 125–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449620903110300>
- Copp, D. (2006). On the agency of certain collective entities: An argument from 'normative autonomy'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 30(1), 194–221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.2006.00135.x>
- Cripps, E. (2011). Climate change, collective harm and legitimate coercion. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 14(2), 171–193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2011.529707>
- Cripps, E. (2013). *Climate change and the moral agent: Individual duties in an interdependent world*. University Press.
- Cullity, G. (2015). Acts, omissions, emissions. In J. Moss (Ed.), *Climate change and justice* (pp. 148–164). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316145340.009>
- Fanciullo, J. (2020). What is the point of helping? *Philosophical Studies*, 177(6), 1487–1500. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-019-01263-7>
- Feinberg, J. (1968). Collective responsibility. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 65(21), 674–688. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024543>
- French, P. (Ed.). (1998). *Individual and collective responsibility*. Schenkman.
- Gardiner, S. M. (2004). Ethics and global climate change. *Ethics*, 114(3), 555–600.
- Garvey, J. (2008). *The ethics of climate change: Right and wrong in a warming world*. Continuum.
- Giddens, A. (2009). *The politics of climate change*. Polity.
- Giubilini, A., & Levy, N. (2018). What in the world is collective responsibility? *Dialectica*, 72(2), 191–217. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1746-8361.12228>
- Greenfield, P. (2023). Revealed: More than 90% of rainforest carbon offsets by biggest certifier are worthless, analysis shows. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/18/revealed-forest-carbon-offsets-biggest-provider-worthless-verra-aoe>
- Gunnemyr, M. (2019). Causing global warming. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 22(2), 399–424. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-019-09990-w>
- Hiller, A. (2011). Climate change and individual responsibility. *The Monist*, 94(3), 349–368. <https://doi.org/10.5840/monist201194318>
- Hindriks, F. (2013). The location problem in social ontology. *Synthese*, 190(3), 413–437. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-011-0036-0>

- Hormio, S. (2023). Collective responsibility for climate change. *WIREs Climate Change*, 14(4). <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.830>
- Hulme, M. (2009). *Why we disagree about climate change: Understanding controversy, inaction and opportunity*. Cambridge University Press.
- IPCC. (2007). Summary for policymakers. In B. Metz (Eds.), *Climate change 2007: Mitigation. Contribution of working group III to the fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on climate change* (pp. 1–23). Cambridge University Press.
- IPCC. (2014). Summary for policymakers. In C. B. Field, V. R. Barros, D. J. Dokken, K. J. Mach, M. D. Mastrandrea, T. E. Bilir, M. Chatterjee, K. L. Ebi, Y. O. Estrada, R. C. Genova, B. Girma, E. S. Kissel, A. N. Levy, S. MacCracken, P. R. Mastrandrea, and L. L. White (Eds.), *Climate change 2014: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability. Part A: Global and sectoral aspects. Contribution of working group II to the fifth assessment report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change* (pp. 1–32). Cambridge University Press.
- IPCC. (2018). Summary for policymakers. In V. Masson-Delmotte, P. Zhai, H. O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P. R. Shukla, A. Pirani, W. Moufouma-Okia, C. Péan, R. Pidcock, S. Connors, J. B. R. Matthews, Y. Chen, X. Zhou, M. I. Gomis, E. Lonnoy, T. Maycock, M. Tignor, T. Waterfield (Eds.), *Global warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* (pp. 32). World Meteorological Organization.
- Isaacs, T. (2006). Collective moral responsibility and collective intention. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 30, 59–73.
- Isaacs, T. (2011). *Moral responsibility in collective contexts*. Oxford University Press.
- Jamieson, D. (2008). *Ethics and the environment: An introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kutz, C. (2000). *Complicity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, D. (2000). Causation as influence. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 97(4), 182–197. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2678389>
- List, C., & Pettit, P. (2011). *Group agency*. Oxford University Press.
- May, L. (1987). *The morality of groups: Collective responsibility, group-based harm, and corporate rights*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- May, L. (1992). *Sharing Responsibility*. University of Chicago Press.
- McGary, H. (1986). Morality and collective liability. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 20(2), 157–165. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00144542>
- Moody-Adams, M. (1994). Culture, responsibility and affected ignorance. *Ethics*, 104(2), 291–309. <https://doi.org/10.1086/293601>
- Nefsky, J. (2015). Fairness, participation, and the real problem of collective harm. In M. Timmons (Ed.), *Oxford studies in normative ethics* (Vol. 5, pp. 245–271). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198744665.003.0012>
- Nefsky, J. (2017). How you can help, without making a difference. *Philosophical Studies*, 174(11), 2743–2767. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-016-0808-y>
- Nefsky, J. (2019). Collective harm and the inefficacy problem. *Philosophy Compass*, 14(4), e12587. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12587>
- Nolt, J. (2011). How harmful are the average American's greenhouse gas emissions? *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 14(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2011.561584>
- Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and persons*. Oxford University Press.
- Pinkert, F. (2018). When are collective obligations too demanding? In K. Hess, V. Ionescu, & T. Isaacs (Eds.), *Collectivity: Ontology, ethics, and social justice* (pp. 175–196). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Placani, A., & Broadhead, S. (2022). Moral dimensions of offsetting luxury emissions. *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 25(3), 297–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2022.2104099>
- Robertson, C. (2021). Reducing personal emissions in response to collective harm. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 34(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-021-09848-1>
- Ross, W. D. (1930). *The right and the good*. Oxford University Press (reprinted 2002).

- Rudy-Hiller, F. (2022). "The epistemic condition for moral responsibility", *the stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman Eds. Winter ed.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/moral-responsibility-epistemic/>
- Sandberg, J. (2011). My emissions make no difference: Climate change and the argument from inconsequentialism. *Environmental Ethics*, 33(3), 229–248. <https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics201133326>
- Schwartz, D. (2010). *Consuming choices: Ethics in a global consumer age*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Shue, H. (1993). Subsistence emissions and luxury emissions. *Law & Policy*, 15(1), 39–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9930.1993.tb00093.x>
- Shue, H. (2022). *The pivotal generation: Why we have a moral responsibility to slow climate change right now*. Princeton University Press.
- Singer, P. (2002). *One world: The ethics of globalization*. Yale University Press.
- Smiley, M. (2023). "Collective responsibility", *the stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman Eds. Fall ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/collective-responsibility/>
- Spiekermann, K. (2014). Small impacts and imperceptible effects: Causing harm with others. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 38(1), 75–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misp.12017>
- Vanderheiden, S. (2007). Climate change and the challenge of moral responsibility. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 32(9999), 85–92.
- Wringe, B. (2020). Global obligations, collective capacities, and 'ought implies can'. *Philosophical Studies*, 177(6), 1523–1538. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-019-01272-6>
- Zoller, D. (2015). Moral responsibility for distant collective harms. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 18(5), 995–1010. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-015-9568-6>