



Climate, Collective Action and Individual Ethical Obligations

Author(s): MARION HOURDEQUIN

Source: *Environmental Values*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (November 2010), pp. 443-464

Published by: White Horse Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25764267>

Accessed: 29-06-2019 00:19 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/25764267?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

White Horse Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Environmental Values*

Climate, Collective Action and Individual Ethical Obligations

MARION HOURDEQUIN

*Assistant Professor
Department of Philosophy
Colorado College
14 E. Cache La Poudre St.
Colorado Springs, CO 80903
Email: marion.hourdequin@coloradocollege.edu*

ABSTRACT

Both Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Baylor Johnson hold that under current circumstances, individuals lack obligations to reduce their personal contributions to greenhouse gas emissions. Johnson argues that climate change has the structure of a tragedy of the commons, and that there is no unilateral obligation to reduce emissions in a commons. Against Johnson, I articulate two rationales for an individual obligation to reduce one's greenhouse gas emissions. I first discuss moral integrity, which recommends congruence between one's actions and positions at the personal and political levels. Second, I draw on a Confucian, relational conception of persons to offer a critique of the collective action/tragedy of the commons framework itself. Under the relational conception, commons problems can be reconceptualised so as to dissolve the stark contrast between the individually and the collectively rational. This perspective can inform our approach to climate change and help reconcile individual and political action to mitigate it.

KEYWORDS

Climate change, collective action, Confucius, commons, environmental ethics

Environmental Values 19 (2010): 443–464. © 2010 The White Horse Press
doi: 10.3197/096327110X531552

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent papers, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) and Baylor Johnson (2003) have argued that under current circumstances, individuals do not have obligations to reduce their personal contributions to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Johnson argues that climate change has the structure of a tragedy of the commons, and that there is no unilateral obligation to reduce emissions in a commons. Rather, one's moral obligation is to work toward a collective agreement that solves the problem. Similarly, Sinnott-Armstrong argues that with respect to climate change, there is nothing morally wrong with driving one's SUV for fun on a Sunday afternoon. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that one's personal choice to drive or not drive has little to no effect on the course of global climate change. Therefore, driving causes no (climate) harm and is morally permissible. Each of us does, however, have an obligation to work toward governmental policies that will mitigate climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

This paper challenges the conclusions of Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong, arguing that although we have moral obligations to work toward collective agreements that will slow global climate change and mitigate its impacts, it is also true that individuals have obligations to reduce their personal contributions to the problem. The paper thus explores rationales for the view that individuals should reduce their personal greenhouse gas emissions. I begin by discussing the idea of moral integrity, which recommends congruence between one's actions and positions at the personal and political levels. Although integrity provides one important rationale for a personal obligation to reduce greenhouse gases (in conjunction with an obligation to address the problem politically), it does not directly challenge the presuppositions of collective action problems, which typically draw a sharp distinction between what is rational for (i.e., in the interests of) the individual and what is rational for society as a whole.

A relational conception of persons provides an alternative framework in which it is possible to reconceptualise collective action problems in a way that dissolves the stark contrast between the individually and the collectively rational. The relational perspective, which I develop by drawing on ideas in Confucian philosophy, emphasises the role of self-cultivation and individual moral development as the basis for social change. Although this view initially appears subject to the kinds of objections that Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong raise – that individual action in the absence of collective action achieves nothing – a subtle characterisation of the view shows that Confucian self-cultivation is essentially social in nature. Individual moral

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

development thus involves the support and instantiation of social institutions that make possible social transformation. I argue that the relational perspective developed in Confucian thought can fruitfully inform our approach to global climate change and help reconcile individual and political action to mitigate it.

II. JOHNSON'S ARGUMENT

Both Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong deny the existence of a personal obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in light of global climate change. Johnson's argument, however, attempts to provide a specific theoretical ground for the lack of personal obligation and hence is more decisive than Sinnott-Armstrong's. Rather than attempt to provide a principled positive case for the lack of personal obligation, Sinnott-Armstrong surveys a number of candidate arguments *for* such an obligation and finds each of them inadequate. The conclusion that we lack an obligation to reduce our personal emissions – or more precisely, that there is no clear ground for a personal obligation to reduce emissions – thus depends on the comprehensiveness of the survey. Since Sinnott-Armstrong does not provide a comprehensive review of all the potential grounds of a personal obligation to reduce emissions (or even of all the plausible grounds: the grounds I discuss below are not considered as a part of the survey), his argument is far from decisive.

Johnson's position is more instructive, because he explains in detail why he believes that climate change should be understood as a collective action problem, and why it follows that there is no unilateral obligation to avoid exploiting the commons in the absence of a collective agreement that puts restraints on individuals' use. Johnson clearly shows how, from a standard collective action perspective, personal action to reduce one's contributions to the problem appears impotent with respect to its solution. What is more, Johnson argues that insofar as one sacrifices one's own interests and well being in the course of such unilateral action, it may be not just inefficacious, but irrational or even unethical to act unilaterally.

Johnson therefore holds that what he calls 'the Kantian rationale' for individual obligations with respect to the commons is misguided. On the Kantian view, 'every commons user ought, morally, to restrict his or her use to a level that would be sustainable if all other users reduced their use in a similar way, and to do this regardless of what others do' (Johnson, 2003: 272). Although intuitively appealing, according to Johnson this rationale overlooks a crucial distinction: the distinction between acting unilaterally in

the absence of a collective agreement, on the one hand, and acting to fulfil one's responsibilities as part of a collective agreement, on the other. Why is this distinction so crucial? For Johnson, the answer turns on the fact that unilateral action – which he understands as individual action to reduce one's depletion of a common resource in the absence of a collective agreement that governs exploitation levels by individuals – has little chance of making any significant positive contribution to solving the commons problem, and in many cases, may make no contribution at all.¹

That this is the case is due to the structure of commons problems, which are characterised by three assumptions (Johnson, 2003: 275, italics in original):

The only incentive players have is to maximise [their individual] benefits from use of the commons.

The only way players can communicate is by increasing or reducing use of the commons.

Use of the commons is shared, [however not all costs and benefits associated with use are shared. Therefore:]

Costs (to the commons) of increased use are shared, but benefits from increased use accrue to the individual...

Benefits (to the commons) of reduced use are shared, but costs of reduced use are borne by the individual...

Resources saved by one individual are available for use by any other user.

Because the costs of increased use are shared, yet each individual gains the full advantage of her increased use, each has an incentive – due to her goal of maximising personal benefit from use of the commons – to use as much as possible. Furthermore, if an individual acts unilaterally, attempting to disrupt the inexorable logic that leads to the commons' depletion, she simply leaves more resources for others to exploit. Her abstention communicates only a message of increased opportunity for others. There is thus no way for unilateral action to succeed in preventing the tragedy.²

In the climate change case, one might think that even if all of this is true, it is nevertheless wrong to emit excessive quantities of greenhouse gases, because: 1) emitting greenhouse gases is in itself morally wrong, and 2) by emitting an excess of greenhouse gases, one is making the problem of climate change worse. However, according to both Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong, emitting greenhouse gases is not in itself morally wrong. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that an individual's fossil fuel emissions alone have virtually no effect on climate change, nor do they create any kind of harm to humans or

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

animals. Similarly, Johnson holds that it is only the *aggregate use* of the commons – in this case, the aggregate emissions of greenhouse gases – that causes harm: ‘individual acts are harmless in themselves’ (Johnson, 2003: 273). Yet given that others are exploiting the commons as well, is it not true that a particular individual’s emissions make climate change *worse*? This, again, Sinnott-Armstrong denies, because an individual’s contribution is negligible and cannot, in itself, raise or lower the temperature of the planet.³ Following Johnson’s logic, one arrives at a similar conclusion: if the effect of an individual’s refraining from burning fossil fuels has no impact on their aggregate use, then the same reasoning implies that an individual’s unrestrained use will have no effect on aggregate use. When one person uses more gasoline (for example), less is available for others. By the laws of supply and demand, this person’s increased use – if it has any noticeable effect at all – will reduce gas supply, increasing price and causing a consequent downward adjustment in demand.⁴

There are clearly a number of assumptions built in to these arguments that one might question, and I return to questions about the logic of collective action problems in section four. First, however, I want to consider whether there might be any reason to reduce one’s personal emissions even if Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong are right that doing so has no direct consequentialist payoff – that is, even if they are right that a reduction in emissions on one person’s part will result in a nonexistent or negligible net change in greenhouse gas emissions overall.

III. INTEGRITY AS A GROUND FOR AN OBLIGATION TO REDUCE PERSONAL EMISSIONS

Even if one doubts that personal obligations in a commons have a Kantian structure, one might nevertheless hold that there exists a personal obligation to reduce one’s greenhouse gas emissions. One ground for such an obligation stems from the acceptance of an obligation that both Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong defend, plus the requirements of moral integrity. Although Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong believe that individuals have no obligation to reduce their personal emissions, both think that individuals *do* have obligations to respond to climate change. More specifically, individuals have obligations to work toward a collective solution to the problem. For Sinnott-Armstrong, this means that individuals have obligations to work toward the election of political candidates who will enact policies to reduce emissions at the national scale; for Johnson, the obligation is ‘to work for a

collective agreement that could avert a potential [tragedy of the commons]' (2003: 283) which encompasses, but is broader than, Sinnott-Armstrong's characterisation of individual obligations. If one accepts the existence of these obligations, then I believe that one must also accept some degree of personal obligation to control one's emissions. The common sense ground for this latter obligation involves an obligation to avoid hypocrisy. However, the ground may be framed more positively as one of moral integrity. Before explaining why integrity, in conjunction with a commitment to mitigating the effects of climate change, entails an individual obligation to reduce emissions, I discuss briefly the ideal of integrity more generally.

Integrity is a frequently-cited virtue. The ideal of integrity figures widely in discussions of business ethics, for example, and in public life, integrity is widely regarded – despite its rarity – as a desired characteristic of politicians. From a philosophical perspective, however, integrity is difficult to pin down. In a recent paper, Audi and Murphy observe the dearth of explicit discussion of integrity in the literature on virtue ethics. They find, further, that 'integrity' is used to express diverse and often vague ideas: 'In a great many cases, "integrity" is a specific-sounding term for something like moral soundness, whose exact character is left quite unspecified' (Audi and Murphy, 2006: 8). In other words, 'integrity' is a 'blunt instrument', one that lacks precision and in many cases could be replaced by a more specific term (Audi and Murphy, 2006: 8).

Nevertheless, Audi and Murphy do not think that the concept of integrity should be abandoned, and they set out to clarify some of the term's central meanings, focusing on the ideas of *integration* and *being integral*. Both of these ideas are important to thinking about integrity in the context of our obligations regarding global climate change. *Integrality* (or *being integral*) involves the internalisation of certain commitments, such that these commitments are central to an individual's identity. When a commitment is fully integral, the individual typically honours it without deliberation (Audi and Murphy, 2006: 9). This sense of integrity clearly bears some relationship to the other sense, for if a commitment is to be integral to an individual's thought and action, it should be *well integrated* with other commitments the individual holds. *Integration* helps the individual avoid conflicts among her various commitments; it involves 'a kind of unity among the elements in which they form a coherent, ideally a harmonious, structure' (Audi and Murphy, 2006: 9).

These two aspects of integrity – integration and integrality – are important to understanding an individual's obligations to address climate change. A person who is truly concerned about climate change and is committed to

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

alleviating it to the best of her ability must make some effort to effect social change, as Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong suggest. However, a person of integrity who has this commitment will act also on a personal level to reduce her own emissions and will, in general, avoid frivolous emissions of greenhouse gases: her actions at the political level will be integrated with those at the personal level.

It may be too strong to say that someone who is working on the political level to reduce collective greenhouse gas emissions, but is not doing anything as an individual to reduce her emissions, is practically inconsistent; yet it certainly seems that an individual who worked for emissions limiting policies while steadily and frivolously increasing her own emissions would be working at cross purposes. The kind of unity that integrity recommends requires that an individual work to harmonise her commitments at various levels and achieve a life in which her commitments are embodied not only in a single sphere, but in the various spheres she inhabits.

Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong might object at this point that integrity does not require personal action to reduce one's GHG emissions, even in light of a more general commitment to abate climate change, because the moral valence of one's actions at the personal and the political level is different. At the political level, one's efforts to support climate change policy have a positive moral valence because they are likely to have positive consequences with respect to climate change mitigation, whereas at the personal level one's efforts have a neutral moral valence because they are likely to have no consequences whatsoever with respect to climate change mitigation.

This assessment is problematic. It is dubious that one's riding a bike instead of driving will lower gas prices such that more people drive or that some people drive more. Although this *could* happen, what actually happens is probably highly context dependent, and there is an equally strong argument to be made in favour of the view that one's commitment to cycling to work might actually cause others to reconsider their own driving habits. Even if such a reconsideration does not lead these individuals to take up biking themselves, they might think more carefully about how they utilise their cars, and perhaps even consider GHG emissions as they make their next car purchase.⁵

Furthermore, even if it is sometimes the case that one's personal actions to reduce climate change have little to no effect on the course of climate change, integrity nevertheless requires a kind of synchrony between personal and political action that Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong fail to acknowledge. Let us grant that there may be cases in which one is justified making tradeoffs between one's actions at the personal and the political level. For example,

MARION HOURDEQUIN

we might think that Al Gore is morally justified in flying around the country (a greenhouse-gas-intensive activity) in order to promote awareness about climate change impacts and catalyse social change. Even so, integrity at the very least grounds a *prima facie* moral obligation for Al Gore to control his own emissions, such that his flying around the country to promote political action may be justified, but his own household energy use warrants scrutiny. In Gore's case, the tension is particularly stark, because he flies around the country not only to advocate large-scale policy changes, but to advocate that *individuals change their actions* so as to reduce their own contributions to the climate change problem.⁶

Even if Gore were not advocating this kind of individual action, however, it seems to me that being a person of integrity involves reconciling, insofar as one can, one's commitments at various levels. Consequentialist calculations can run counter to such integration (witness the moral valence argument above), but this is often a shortcoming rather than a virtue of such calculations. Consequentialism has long been criticised for its failure to recognise the separateness of persons. In consequentialist arguments against an obligation to reduce one's own emissions, the reasoning fails to recognise the *wholeness* of persons. That is, consequentialism may not only blur the boundaries between individuals, but fail to acknowledge a coherent structure *within* them, as Bernard Williams (1973) has cogently pointed out. To coherently structure one's life around a commitment to mitigate climate change requires that one take this commitment seriously in both one's personal life and one's political action. And unless there is good reason to believe that restricting one's own emissions would undermine larger scale change, those committed to the overall goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions ought to do so themselves. The virtue of integrity entails that this obligation holds even if one's personal actions are themselves neutral with respect to their direct consequences for climate.⁷

In principle, consequentialist considerations have an important role to play in ethics, so what I have said should not be taken as a general indictment of consequentialist reasoning. However, consequentialist reasoning in the arguments for a political, but not personal, obligation with respect to climate change does not take adequate account of human psychology.⁸ Pointing to integrity as a countervailing consideration is valuable in this context because it takes fuller account of psychological considerations that make the stark separation of personal and political obligations unreasonable and undesirable.

Nevertheless, the value of integrity can itself be justified on consequentialist grounds, albeit grounds reflecting sensitivity to human psychology.

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

Integrity is a virtue for both intrapersonal and interpersonal reasons. At the intrapersonal level, integrity is a moral virtue that acknowledges the psychological and agential benefits of integrating one's commitments into a coherent whole, and of bringing one's beliefs, words, and actions into line with one another. Interpersonally, integrity is a virtue from the perspective of intersubjective intelligibility and in affirming to others the authenticity of one's commitments. Where we see in others a lack of coherence between their political commitments and personal choices, we often wonder how to make sense of this apparent mismatch, and we may question the sincerity with which certain commitments are held. A politician's environmental commitments, as embodied in public pronouncements and legislative support, for example, may be called into question if he or she lives a lavish and environmentally damaging lifestyle.⁹

Mark Halfon (1989) suggests another ground for the value of integrity. He describes a case in which an individual is dedicated to political change – in this case, the abolition of institutionalised racism – and suffers significantly as a result of this commitment because she is protesting official government policy. What is more, in the case Halfon describes, it is highly unlikely that the activist's commitment will be effective in inducing a change in government policy.¹⁰ From a consequentialist perspective, then, the activist's commitments make no sense: she is bringing more suffering upon herself than she is likely to alleviate through her commitment. We may nevertheless say that the activist is a person of integrity, and that her integrity is morally admirable. Why? Halfon (1989: 146) says:

One thing that can be said [about such a person] is that she wants or chooses to be a certain kind of person, or to live a certain way of life, and that her life loses its meaning or point if she fails to actively fight against what she believes to be a demeaning and unjust institution.

In the case of climate change, we might say that a commitment to mitigating climate change should, in general, entail a commitment to being the kind of person who is thoughtful about her greenhouse gas emissions and makes an effort to reduce them.¹¹ Just as it would be odd and morally problematic for an environmental activist who is fighting for controls on non-point source pollution to dump large quantities of fertiliser on her lawn, it is odd and morally problematic for a climate change activist to be profligate and thoughtless about her GHG emissions.

IV. CONFUCIANISM AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

The rationale Halfon articulates is tied to questions of identity and self-conception. Halfon suggests that integrity contributes to one's being a 'certain kind of person' in the same way that virtue contributes to eudaimonia in Aristotelian moral philosophy: integrity is constitutive of being a certain kind of person just as virtue is a constitutive element of eudaimonia. While sharing with Halfon the view that considerations of identity and self-conception are important in thinking about the grounds of moral obligation, I discuss below these issues from a Confucian perspective. The Confucian perspective holds promise in that it reveals more thoroughly than considerations of integrity the crucial problems with arguments against a personal obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In particular, the Confucian approach differs from the integrity approach in that it directly challenges the presuppositions of collective action problems, providing an important supplement to integrity arguments for a personal obligation to reduce one's greenhouse gas emissions.

Recall, first, the logic of collective action problems that leads Johnson to conclude that unilateral action to reduce one's emissions in a tragedy of the commons will be fruitless, and even self-defeating:

The only incentive players have is to maximise benefits from [their individual] use of the commons.

The only way players can communicate is by increasing or reducing use of the commons.

Use of the commons is shared, [however not all costs and benefits associated with use are shared.] (Johnson, 2003: 275)

Commons problems presuppose that individuals are rational economic actors who seek to take personal advantage of the commons to the greatest degree possible and who do not influence one another's thinking or decision making in morally salient ways. A single individual's restraint will be exploited by others. Thus, unilateral restraint is not only irrational, but morally impotent: unilateral action will do nothing to save the commons from overexploitation.

A Confucian perspective on morality challenges this view. First, and perhaps most importantly, Confucian philosophy does not understand the individual as an isolated, rational actor. Instead, the Confucian self is defined relationally (Hall and Ames, 1998; Rosemont, 1991). Persons are constituted by and through their relations with others. According to Confucianism, we learn how to be persons – how to be moral and how to live in a community

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

with others – first in the family. There, children witness generosity and care and learn the virtues of respect and gratitude. Children also learn to understand themselves as an integral part of a human community, where their actions not only have material consequences, but also symbolic meaning. Though it may not matter, functionally, what kind of vessel one uses to pour water or what kind of material is used to make one's garments, such choices may have significant symbolic importance within the culture, such that one may express respect by making one choice and disrespect by making another.

The Confucian model is, further, one in which individuals look to one another as examples, learning from one another what constitutes virtuous behaviour.¹² Confucius believes that moral models have magnetic power, and virtuous individuals can effect moral reform through their actions by inspiring others to change themselves (Confucius, 1983: 12.19, 16.1, 4.25).

Whether virtuous individuals have the moral powers Confucius attributes to them may be controversial. In contrast to the Confucian view, the rational actor model suggests that altruistic individuals simply provide opportunities of which others take advantage. However, even if the Confucian optimism about a single individual's transformative powers is overstated, the conception of the self that figures in Confucian ethics provides an important counterpoint to the model of the rational economic actor: it represents not only an alternative possibility for the construction of human identities, but a possibility that many people actually embrace – at least in certain contexts. This possibility may, in turn, help provide an important way out of the seemingly inexorable logic of collective action problems, whose seriousness and intractability arises in part from the framing of the problems themselves. In particular, I argue below that when persons conceive of themselves relationally, as opposed to atomistically, individual 'unilateral' actions can both catalyse and support emerging collective agreements.

Contrasting Garrett Hardin's approach to commons problems with a Confucian one may help illustrate more clearly these points. Hardin argues, with respect to his canonical example of the sheep pasture, that in the absence of top-down measures to limit grazing on the commons, individuals will fail to show the restraint necessary to sustain the commons as a resource for all. The solution to such problems, according to Hardin (1968:1247), requires coercion, or as he puts it 'mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of the people affected'. Hardin is deeply sceptical of the prospects for 'conscience' to play a role in the solution to collective action problems; instead, he recommends privatisation of resources, taxation and legislative prohibitions of certain behaviours. Hardin's recommendations find echoes in the views of Johnson, for if Hardin is right (as Johnson seems to accept),

then it is not individual action, but only large-scale social policy that can resolve problems such as climate change.

Yet Hardin's view diverges significantly from a Confucian perspective, which explicitly rejects coercion as a route to genuine social reform.¹³ On the Confucian model, although coercion may keep people out of trouble, it cannot accomplish thoroughgoing social change, involving the transformation of minds as well as actions. Thus, reform achieved primarily through coercion will be both shallow and unstable. In order to solve a collective action problem, it is not just incentives for individually rational agents that need to change. Policy is not enough: what is also crucial is moral change in individuals. Changing institutions without changing people will not resolve tensions between the individual and the collective good.

In the contemporary context, the Confucian point is this: while one can provide both carrots, in the form of economic incentives, and sticks, in the form of laws and regulations, to foster reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, such top-down measures comprise only *part* of the solution. If people do not recognise and affirm the need to control their greenhouse gas emissions, the effectiveness of such efforts may be limited or unstable.¹⁴ Aldo Leopold (1987) made a similar point long ago when he complained about farmers who were willing to enact conservation on their lands only when such measures were paid for by others, and argued for an environmentalism based on a broadened sense of responsibility, embodied in an ecological conscience.

I do not want to argue so much for the ineffectiveness of policy-level changes as I do for the efficacy of individual action to reduce one's own emissions. In this regard, the Confucian model is instructive because it asks us to recognise the possibility that persons need not – and many do not – see themselves as rational economic actors, making decisions based only on a preference structure that stands independent of social consequences or others' values and decisions. If persons are constituted relationally, as Confucians suggest, then one individual's actions cannot be treated as independent of others', and one's personal actions cannot be understood in isolation from their social meaning. Whether one chooses to drive a hybrid electric vehicle and to minimise one's miles driven, or to drive a gas-guzzling SUV with no thought about the number of car trips one takes, one communicates not merely information about how much of the atmospheric commons one is using up, but also sends a message regarding one's concern (or lack thereof) for the commons. When people see themselves as connected members of a moral community, they react to such messages in moral ways: by admiring, and in some cases at least, emulating those whose actions protect the commons, and by criticising, and in some cases, openly reprimanding those whose

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

actions do not. Such responses can assist in the responsible management of common resources. What seem unlikely to foster such responses, however, are conceptual frameworks that treat individuals as atomistic economic actors whose personal efforts to reduce damage to the commons are viewed as irrational and of little or no moral value. As research by Robert Frank et al. (1993) strongly suggests, people see the *Homo economicus* framework not only as descriptive, but as normative, such that the application of models of narrow economic rationality to environmental problems may encourage people to conceptualise themselves and act in accordance with the assumptions of these models.

Yet despite the prevalence of such models in our contemporary society (which no doubt gives support to those who choose not to do anything to reduce their personal emissions), there is good evidence that many people do not understand themselves or their decisions exclusively or even primarily through this lens. For example, people seem to view and judge others' personal choices about what kind of car to drive as moral choices that reflect their overall commitment (or lack thereof) to solving the 'collective action problem' of climate change. In recent research, Thomas Turrentine and Kenneth Kurani (2007) found in interviews with car owners that people who drove hybrids expressed anger toward purchasers of SUVs, presumably based on their environmental impact. Furthermore, individuals who purchased hybrid electric vehicles often cited other hybrid owners as models for their purchasing decisions, and Turrentine and Kurani found that people rarely purchase hybrid vehicles based on the kind of decision-making process described by the rational economic actor model. People rarely know how much they spend on fuel, for example, or how many miles per gallon their cars achieve, and when considering a hybrid purchase, they rarely calculate how long it would take for the fuel efficiency payback to compensate for the premium in the purchase price (Turrentine and Kurani, 2007). Instead, people choose hybrid cars to make a statement, to express their commitment to the environment, and to discuss with others their choice (Turrentine and Kurani, 2007: 1221).

The traditional framework of collective action suggests that such individual actions can have no positive effect on the development of a large-scale solution to the problem. But if the data from hybrid purchasing decisions are any indication, then it seems that one individual's environmentally conscious decision can spur another's, and decisions about what kind of car to buy, how much to drive, and so on, are viewed by many as falling within the moral sphere. Such decisions are the subject of others' moral judgments and can be the basis for social approbation and disapprobation – and we know from

models in evolutionary game theory that moralistic punishment of selfish (or otherwise socially-disapproved) actions can lead to the stabilisation of altruistic (or socially approved) behaviours within a population (Boyd and Richerson, 1992).

The critical point is that individual rationality is not simply a matter of preference satisfaction independent of the effects of one's actions on others. If individuals do not see themselves as rational economic actors in the narrow sense described by the assumptions of a tragedy of the commons framework – and evidence suggests that they do not – then there are ways in which so-called 'unilateral' actions by individuals can influence other individuals not to take advantage of the 'excess resources' remaining in the commons, but to see the restraint of others as a model for their own exercise of restraint.¹⁵ Furthermore, if there is a sufficient critical mass of individuals who are committed to such restraint, these individuals can exercise moral suasion over the more obdurate members of the community, and they are better positioned to form a bloc whose commitment to protecting the commons can be voiced effectively through legislative or other channels.¹⁶

Just as individuals are not atomistic, narrowly self-interested actors, isolated from one another in their decisions and values, actions at the individual level are not divorced from those in the political sphere. A commitment at the personal level may in fact spur greater awareness and more careful consideration of the kinds of political changes that may be most effective. After installing solar panels on one's house, for example, one may recognise more clearly the importance of net metering legislation and feel more inclined to lobby for it than one would based on the abstract recognition that such legislation would be a good thing.

If we take seriously a Confucian conception of persons as both descriptive and normative, then we ought not assume – as the logic of collective action problems does – that the motives of individuals who partake of the shared resources of a commons are narrowly self-interested. Confucian morality counsels against such an individualistic self-conception, and the work of Turentine and Kurani suggests that the presuppositions of the collective action framework are not necessarily borne out, even in a highly individualistic culture such as that of the United States.¹⁷ Since philosophical and economic characterisations of persons have both descriptive and normative functions, such that these characterisations may produce the very kinds of persons they describe, we should consider carefully the heuristic value of thinking about our climate change obligations in a traditional collective action context. Although the collective action framework may be useful for certain purposes, it is not clear that it provides an adequate justification for

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

the view that in the absence of a collective agreement, individuals have no obligation to reduce their personal greenhouse gas emissions. Collective agreements can emerge in a variety of ways, and the hybrid vehicle example above suggests that individual consumer decisions, personal conversations about such decisions, and similar small-scale, local actions may turn out to be important catalysts for emerging collective agreements, and may support and reinforce agreements and policies at larger scales. Hence, the distinction between acting unilaterally and acting to fulfil one's responsibilities as part of a collective agreement is not sharp, but rather a matter of degree. As such, a strong distinction between one's obligations under a collective agreement and one's obligations in the absence of such an agreement is unjustified.

Part of what makes personal choices effective and morally important is that personal choices have a communicative and social function. On the Confucian view, individual actions gain their moral value in a social context. Thus, although Confucius emphasises the importance of virtuous action at the personal level, he also insists that one ought not to ignore one's political obligations in order to preserve personal moral purity, nor withdraw from society in order to live – in isolation – in accord with one's individual values (Hourdequin, 2010). With respect to climate change, a Confucian perspective therefore supports a personal moral obligation to reduce one's greenhouse gas emissions, but insists that one's obligations do not end there: one ought also to work for larger scale social reform, for regional, national, and international policies to reduce emissions and mitigate the effects of global warming.

V. CONCLUSION

I have argued that there are at least two grounds on which to question the view that individuals have no obligation to reduce their personal greenhouse gas emissions. The first is based on an argument from integrity, which requires consistent expression of one's commitments at the personal and political level. The second argument draws on the Confucian conception of morality and personhood to highlight the relational and symbolic dimensions of human action. On this view, the dichotomy between the individually and the collectively rational is drawn too starkly in the traditional framing of collective action problems. Because individuals are constituted relationally, their actions have moral significance both in the context of their local interactions and in the context of larger communities. From a Confucian point of view, one cannot neatly separate individuals from the community

MARION HOURDEQUIN

or parse the costs and benefits of action in the terms outlined in the framing of collective action problems, because morally mature individuals do not understand incentives as so framed.

In the case of climate change, an atomistic conception of persons can lead to two different kinds of problems. The first is one in which individualism supports the view that an individual's *only* responsibility is at the personal level; the second is one that supports the view that the individual's only responsibility in a 'tragedy of the commons' is at the level of policy. The arguments of Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong respond to the first problematic kind of individualism. It is this kind of individualism that can lead people to believe that so long as they 'live lightly on the planet', they are not responsible for the depletion of resources and damage to the earth's climate and need not take political action to address these problems. This kind of individualism fails to recognise the individual's role in society and broad responsibility to promote good social decisions.

However, a second kind of individualism is equally problematic: this is the individualism that finds its expression in the view that one's only responsibility is to change society without changing oneself. This kind of individualism, which rests on the sort of assumptions that characterise collective action problems, fails to recognise the connections between the personal and the social, the expressive function of personal action, the importance of integrity, the role of individual action in constructing one's moral identity, and the effect of individual action on one's relations with others, and on *their* actions. I have tried, in this paper, to highlight the problems with this latter kind of individualism, and the promise of abandoning it.

Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong hold that there is no personal moral obligation to reduce GHG emissions because personal reductions cannot mitigate the problem of global climate change. I have argued that personal reductions *can* make a contribution, and hence that if there is an obligation to ameliorate climate change, it includes a personal obligation to control one's own emissions. However, in order to see how personal reductions can contribute – and in order for such contributions to be most effective – we may need to conceptualise persons differently, and more relationally, than is the case in a tragedy of the commons model.

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

NOTES

For helpful comments, I am grateful to Rick Furtak, Baylor Johnson, David Littlewood, Alex Rosenberg, David Wong, the Colorado Springs Philosophy Discussion Group, the audience at the 2008 ISEE/IAEP Joint Meeting in Allenspark, CO, and two anonymous reviewers for *Environmental Values*.

¹ Notice that Johnson argues against the 'Kantian rationale' on consequentialist grounds: he finds this rationale problematic because, in his view, acting on it will do nothing to ameliorate climate change. The Kantian might reply, however, that it is not the consequences of an action that determine its morality; rather, it is the motive that is crucial, and those who fail to curtail their own emissions lack the proper motive: the maxim on which they act is not one that rational agents could will as a universal law, because one cannot rationally will that each person act with no regard for their contribution to climate change. Here, Thomas Hill, Jr.'s work on consent in interpreting Kant is helpful: we can ask, would rational agents consent to the universalisation of the maxim, 'Each person may act to secure his or her own interests without attention to the effects of their actions on the commons?' Clearly not. For further background, see 'Hypothetical Consent in Kantian Constructivism' (Hill 2002: 61–95). Thanks to David Littlewood and an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify these points.

² It is important to note that the assumptions outlined above are idealisations that allow commons problems to be modelled and analysed. Some deviation from these assumptions is to be expected and minor deviations may not compromise the model's value. Significant deviations do, however, call into question the aptness of the model. Below I suggest that deviations from assumptions 1 and 2 are significant, and that these deviations call into question the conclusion that unilateral action is inefficacious.

³ The claim that individual acts cause no climate-related harm is contestable. First, if there are threshold effects on climate change, then one individual's action could move the climate beyond an important 'tipping point.' Second, Parfit (1984) argues that small or imperceptible harms can be morally wrong, and even *very* wrong. Sinnott-Armstrong (2005: 291) dismisses Parfit's arguments because he insists that the minute changes in climate caused by a single individual's actions are not harms: 'No storms or floods or heat waves can be traced to my individual acts of driving.' Individuals *qua* individuals do not cause climate harms, asserts Sinnott-Armstrong – but he provides little argument to refute Parfit's claims in chapter 3 of *Reasons and Persons* (1984), which point in the direction of counting individual contributions to climate change as harms.

⁴ In 'Unilateral Actions in a Tragedy of the Commons' (unpublished ms.), Johnson acknowledges that the supply-demand argument is contingent on features of the commodities in question. Where price elasticity is limited, reduced consumption may not significantly reduce price; similarly, increased consumption may not significantly raise it.

⁵These are hypotheses about how certain individual behaviours (in this case, bicycling) affect the thought and behaviour of others. As such, they are subject to investigation using the tools of social scientific research (laboratory experimentation, observation of human behaviours, and theoretical modelling). To my knowledge, there exists no research that specifically investigates bicycle commuters' effects on others' transportation choices and behaviour. However, there is a growing body of evidence supporting the plausibility of the claims made here. For example, Christakis and Fowler (2008, 2009) have shown the importance of social networks in influencing behaviour (e.g., smoking cessation shows striking social patterns, where the smoking behaviour of close contacts influences strongly the likelihood that a person will quit) and have argued based on experimental evidence that, in the words of a recent article's title, 'cooperative behaviour cascades in human social networks' (Fowler and Christakis, unpublished ms.). This latter work specifically examined behaviour in public goods games, whose structure mirrors that of the tragedy of the commons described by Johnson in relation to climate change. Other authors find that certain consumer choices (e.g., hybrid vehicle purchases) and individual behaviours (e.g., bicycle commuting) develop important symbolic values for individuals and communities, that conversations among individuals about their transportation choices are important in constructing these meanings, and that individual choices reflect concern for these symbolic values (see Axsen and Kurani, 2009; Heffner et al., 2006; Heffner et al., 2007; Horton, 2006). At the very least, these studies suggest that communication, meanings, and behaviours surrounding the use of public goods such as clean air are much more complex than posited by the assumptions of the commons model Johnson employs.

⁶Gore reportedly purchases carbon offsets to counteract his greenhouse gas emissions; however, substantial controversy exists about whether carbon offsets are of comparable value to individual reductions in consumption.

⁷A stronger formulation of this claim would hold that for a person committed to preventing dangerous climate change, integrity requires personal reductions even if such reductions are neutral with respect to *all* consequences, not just direct climate consequences. Such a view might be held by those who believe that the value of integrity does not depend exclusively or even primarily on the consequences it produces. Mark Halfon's view (discussed below) pushes in this direction. However, even those with broadly consequentialist moral views should be able to accept the more modest claim made here, if they accept the positive personal and interpersonal consequences of integrity, discussed below. What's more, if part of what allows us to take our commitments seriously is a unity among them and a unity between thought and action, then a person may take his commitment to political action to address climate change more seriously if the commitment to mitigating climate change also is expressed in personal action. If this is right, then the individual political action recommended by Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong may be fortified by corresponding personal commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This would provide a consequentialist rationale for endorsing integrity and associated personal reductions.

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

⁸ Dale Jamieson (2007) argues along related lines in his 'When utilitarians should be virtue theorists', where he holds that direct consequentialism is not psychologically feasible either as a decision procedure or as a general approach to solving collective action problems, and that cultivating the virtues is in fact more effective than consequentialist calculation in achieving the best outcomes. Jamieson himself remains a consequentialist, but believes that virtue often can serve the aims of consequentialism better than consequentialist calculation. Ronald Sandler (2009) argues that moral theories that emphasise the virtues are better positioned than utilitarian theories to handle 'longitudinal collective action problems' such as global climate change.

⁹ Johnson acknowledges that individual action 'may be necessary to convince others of one's sincerity and of the viability of what one proposes' at the political level – he thus sees a pragmatic reason, under certain circumstances, for unilateral reductions. However, he indicates that if his argument against the efficacy of unilateral actions goes through, then people should not see failures to make individual reductions as hypocritical in those advocating political change. See Johnson (2003: 285). Here, Johnson and I disagree on whether consequentialism should be adapted to accommodate human psychology, or whether human psychology can and should be adapted to accommodate consequentialism.

¹⁰ This irony of this particular example as a response to Johnson is worth noting: while Johnson holds that individual action is non-obligatory in the case of climate change because it is unlikely to be efficacious in the absence of a collective agreement, Halfon's case shows that similar reasoning could tell against an obligation to take political action, which Johnson believes *does* apply in the climate case. Sandler (2009) notes that the problem of inefficacy – or what he calls 'the problem of in-consequentialism' – surfaces not only with respect to individual emissions but also with respect to individual action to support a climate mitigation regime. Halfon's reply to this problem emphasises that it is not only consequences that matter: being a certain kind of person matters morally as well. A utilitarian might interpret this sort of reply as pushing for the inclusion of certain potentially-overlooked consequences (specifically, consequences for the agent's own well being that relate to his or her own interest in living a certain kind of life), but this is not Halfon's view of the matter. He is arguing on explicitly non-consequentialist grounds: not all moral value can be cashed out in terms of consequences.

¹¹ This line of reasoning is consistent with a virtue ethical analysis which holds that inattention to one's personal greenhouse gas emissions reflects poorly on one's character. Although integrity demands effort to reduce one's personal emissions only in light of a pre-existing commitment to mitigating climate change, there may be other character-based reasons for moderating one's greenhouse gas emissions. In assessing a person's profligate use of fossil fuels, we might ask, as Thomas Hill, Jr. (1983) put it (in a slightly different context), 'What sort of person would do a thing like that?' Possible answers include: a person lacking humility (to follow Hill), a person lacking self-restraint, or a person lacking sufficient concern for others and the natural world. An Aristotelian virtue ethical reply to Johnson might be developed along these lines; however, such an approach would require specification of the virtue

MARION HOURDEQUIN

expressed by moderating one's emissions (and the vice expressed by failing to do so) and place this virtue in larger theoretical context (e.g., explaining the virtue's relation to a broader theory of the good). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the potential for a reply along these lines.

¹² In the *Analects*, Confucius (1983: 19.22) observes that there is no one from whom he cannot learn: 'There is no man who does not have something of the way of Wen and Wu in him. Superior men have got hold of what is of major significance while inferior men have got hold of what is minor significance. From whom, then, does the Master not learn?'

¹³ 'Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble, but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves' (Confucius, 1983: 2.3).

¹⁴ See Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990) for detailed discussion of the ways in which the costs of monitoring and enforcement of collective action arrangements may impede success when the arrangement is imposed from outside (e.g., by a central government), whereas management of common resources may meet greater success where collective action arrangements are the result voluntary self-organisation.

¹⁵ Jamieson (2007: 179) too notes the importance of the 'example-setting and role-modeling' aspects of individual behaviour.

¹⁶ See Paul Rozin (1999) for discussion of how moralisation of certain behaviours can lead to social change. Rozin argues that moralisation of behaviours leads to institutional prohibitions, education to discourage these behaviours, transmission of norms from parents to children, and censure of those practising the negatively-moralised behaviour. See also note 5 above.

¹⁷ Although I have used a Confucian framework to illustrate the possibilities entailed by adopting a relational conception of persons, relational conceptions can be found in the Western tradition as well. For example, Piers Stephens (2001: 12) points to John Stuart Mill as implicitly advocating 'the idea of the agent as a social and relational being'. Similarly, many feminist ethical theories emphasise the relational dimensions of human life (e.g., Noddings, 1984).

REFERENCES

- Audi, R. and P. Murphy. 2006. 'The many faces of integrity'. *Business Ethics Quarterly* 16(1): 3–21.
- Axsen, J. and K. Kurani. 2009. 'Interpersonal influence within car buyers' social networks: five perspectives on plug-in hybrid electric vehicle demonstration participants'. Research Report UCD-ITS-WP-09-04. Davis, CA: University of California-Institute of Transportation Studies.

CLIMATE, COLLECTIVE ACTION...

- Boyd, R. and P. Richerson. 1992. 'Punishment allows the evolution of cooperation (or anything else) in sizable groups'. *Ethology and Sociobiology* 13(3): 171–195.
- Christakis, N.A. and J.H. Fowler. 2008. 'The collective dynamics of smoking in a large social network'. *New England Journal of Medicine* 358(21): 2249–2258.
- Christakis, N.A. and J.H. Fowler. 2009. *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*. New York: Little, Brown, and Co.
- Confucius. 1983. *The Analects (Lun yu)*, trans. D.C. Lau. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Fowler, J.H. and N.A. Christakis. Unpublished manuscript. 'Cooperative behavior cascades in human social networks'. Available at: <http://arxiv.org/abs/0908.3497> (accessed 23 Sept. 2009).
- Frank, R.H., T. Gilovich and D. Regan. 1993. 'Does studying economics inhibit cooperation?'. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7(2): 159–171.
- Halfon, M. 1989. *Integrity: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hall, D. and R. Ames. 1998. *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.
- Hardin, G. 1968. 'The tragedy of the commons'. *Science* 162: 1243–1248.
- Heffner, R., T. Turrentine and K. Kurani. 2006. 'A primer on automobile semiotics'. Research Report UCD-ITS-RR-06-01. Davis, CA: University of California-Institute of Transportation Studies.
- Heffner, R., K. Kurani and T. Turrentine. 2007. 'Symbolism in California's early market for hybrid electric vehicles'. *Transportation Research Part D* 12: 396–413.
- Hill, T.E., Jr. 1983. 'Ideals of human excellence and preserving natural environments'. *Environmental Ethics* 5: 211–224.
- Hill, T.E., Jr. 2002. *Human Welfare and Moral Worth: Kantian Perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Horton, D. 2006. 'Environmentalism and the bicycle'. *Environmental Politics* 15(4): 41–58.
- Hourdequin, M. 2010. 'Engagement, withdrawal, and social reform: Confucian and contemporary perspectives'. *Philosophy East and West* 60(3): 369–390.
- Jamieson, D. 2007. 'When utilitarians should be virtue theorists'. *Utilitas* 19(2): 160–183.
- Johnson, B. 2003. 'Ethical obligations in a tragedy of the commons'. *Environmental Values* 12(3): 271–287.
- Johnson, B. Unpublished manuscript. 'Unilateral actions in a tragedy of the commons'.
- Leopold, A. 1987. 'The land ethic', in *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Noddings, N. 1984. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

MARION HOURDEQUIN

- Ostrom, E. 1990. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rosemont, H. 1991. 'Rights-bearing individuals and role-bearing persons', in Mary I. Bockover (ed.), *Rules, Rituals, and Responsibilities: Essays Dedicated to Herbert Fingarette*. LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Press.
- Rozin, P. 1999. 'The process of moralization'. *Psychological Science* 10(3): 218–221.
- Sandler, R. 2009. 'Ethical theory and the problem of inconsequentialism: why environmental ethicists should be virtue-oriented ethicists'. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* Online First, published August 7, 2009.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. 2005. 'It's not my fault: global warming and individual moral obligations', in W. Sinnott-Armstrong and R. Howarth (eds.), *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics* (Amsterdam: Elsevier): 285–307.
- Stephens, P. 2001. 'Green liberalism: nature, agency, and the good', *Environmental Politics* 10(3): 1–47.
- Turrentine, T. and K. Kurani. 2007. 'Car buyers and fuel economy?', *Energy Policy* 35(2): 1213–1223.
- Williams, B. 1973. 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J.C.C. Smart and B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (New York: Cambridge): 77–150.