

Power, Political Responsibility and Climate Change

‘Ethics in a Global Environment’

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ABSTRACT: Tackling climate change and the transition to a zero carbon economy require a radical transformation of the social, economic and political institutions that structure our lives. It calls for the overhaul of the layout of our cities, towns, and infrastructure; implementing public transit systems; designing buildings to be energy efficient; mass electrification; deployment of renewables; investing in clean energy and facilitating clean energy transfer; keeping fossil fuels in the ground; eradicating fossil fuel funds; and the re-evaluation of existing practices and social norms. It is also imperative that this transition is a just one, one in which any burdens are borne fairly. All this requires concerted political action.

But what kind of political action is required? Who has what political responsibilities to bring about this change? What political responsibilities do you or I have? What are the sources of these responsibilities? Political action requires coalitions and cooperation with others, but then this raises further questions that arise from membership of a political movement. What form should such political cooperation take? What responsibilities do people have as political actors? Do we have a duty to temper our view and compromise in the interests of effectiveness? How do we go about answering such questions? My aim in this paper is to provide some answers to these questions.

I define ‘political responsibilities’ as ‘responsibilities to take action to change the social, economic, legal and political frameworks within which we live in order to mitigate and adapt to climate change on just terms’. [a deliberately broad definition of the ‘political’]

I: Political Responsibilities

To address climate change requires extensive political action. We therefore need an account of political responsibilities – one that provides answers to the following questions:

Q1: What kinds of action should such agents engage in? If someone says ‘people should take political action to prevent climate change’ what kinds of actions and behaviours should be included? (the **content** question)

Q2: What kinds of agents bear political responsibilities? Are political responsibilities borne by governments, firms, trade unions, religious organizations, individuals, universities, other agents? Some or all of the above? What’s the unit of analysis? (the **unit of analysis** question)

Q3: Which specific agents have political responsibilities? Suppose that we think (in answer to Q2) that individuals have political responsibilities, do *all* individuals have them or just some? (the **agent** question)

Q4: Who should discharge which tasks? And how should the burdens of discharging political responsibilities distributed among the relevant agents? Equally? Do should some bear greater burdens? (the **task and burden distribution** question)

Q5: How great are the burdens that we can reasonably impose on duty-bearers? (the **magnitude** question)

II: Normative Criteria

Four Desiderata or criteria for a Theory of (Climate) Political Responsibilities

1st: Harm-Prevention Justice: We need an account of responsibilities such that if people discharge them those whose interests are jeopardized by climate change will receive the level of protection to which they are entitled. [justice to potential victims]

2nd: Duty-Bearer Justice: An account should not yield responsibilities that are unreasonably demanding (an absolute standard) or distribute burdens unfairly (a comparative standard) [justice to potential duty bearers]

3rd: Determinacy: An account should yield determinate responsibilities (not vague or uninformative ones)

4th: Identifiability: An account should yield responsibilities that one can reasonably expect the bearers of those responsibilities to be able to identify and to ascertain what their responsibilities are. (It would be wrong to propose responsibilities that the bearers could not themselves identify or could only do so in difficult or onerous ways).

I think that the reasoning for the 1st and 2nd provide support for the 3rd and 4th

* If you want to get the job done (criterion 1) you want responsibilities that are determinate and that the duty-bearers can identify.

* If you want to distribute the burdens of responsibilities fairly (criterion 2) you want responsibilities that are determinate and that the duty-bearers can identify. Normally people are blameworthy for failure to discharge responsibilities ... so it is not fair to assign people ill-defined vague prescriptions and/or ones that they cannot reasonably be expected to figure out.

III: We Lack An Account of (Climate) Political Responsibilities

Many are just silent on this.

§1. Others say things which are pretty vague and indeterminate. For example:

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong:

Our political duty as citizens is “to get governments to do their job to prevent the disaster of excessive global warming” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2010, p.344)

John Broome

“In your political actions, you should play your part in getting your government to act as it should” (Broome 2012, p.65).

Comment: too vague and ill-defined (so fails criterion 3). If someone asks: What should I do? It is not at all clear what actions they should undertake, or how they could figure it out (criterion 4). Related point could be made to Stephanie Collins’s discussion of duties (“The Coordination Principle) in *Group Duties*.¹

§2. Some do come up with more specific statements. For example, Elizabeth Cripps on “promotional duties”. She writes

“consider an individual living in (say) the UK, faced with the problem of climate change. She could **campaign and vote** for candidates for local and national office who are committed to promoting international and national mitigation and adaptation efforts.[fn8] In the absence of such candidates, she could **stand** herself or encourage a suitable candidate to do so. She could petition her local MPs and MEPs to change their policies. She could **send emails** to the UK Prime Minister, the US president, the UN Secretary General, the President of the European Commission, or the President of China. She could write them **open letters** in national or international newspapers or on social media sites. She could donate to campaign organizations such as Friends of the Earth. She could sign and **circulate petitions**, in person or online. She could **join or organize marches** at international summits. She could **write articles, set up websites**, and otherwise call for adherents to the kind of norm-changing ‘global citizenship movement’ suggested by Dale Jamieson.[fn9] The list is by no means exhaustive, but it serves to illustrate the scope of possible actions.” (Cripps 2013, p.143)

Comment: Obj1 Why these? No evidence that that these would work and/or that they are the best courses (criterion 1). Obj2: For that we’d need an empirical analysis of what needs to be done and then consider who can and should do it. Anything that is done without that is ad hoc. We need a

¹ See COLLINS (2019, ch4).

more systematic account. Furthermore, Obj3, we need an account geared to agents other than individuals, as well as to individuals.

IV: The Politics of the Just Transition

How then do we think about this systematically? I want to make the case for eight theses. To introduce the first: Given that we are seeking to identify the responsibilities to bring about a transformation in our social, economic, legal and political world it is vital to have an understanding of how this transformation can come about. To approach this issue I suggest that we do two things.

Step 1: We need an analytical framework of how transformations (and energy transitions) occur. As Erik Olin Wright argues in *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010, Pt IV) an account of social transformation should specify

- the **political obstacles** to change and the forces maintaining the unjust status quo;
- the **political opportunities** for change that exist within the existing framework;
- how the **obstacles and opportunities are likely to evolve over time**;
- the **strategies** that agents can use to overcome the obstacles and exploit the opportunities to bring about the necessary change.

Step 2: To apply this to climate politics, we need to draw on the social scientific literature to identify the relevant **political obstacles** and **political opportunities** and **how these are likely to evolve**, as well as the **political strategies** for change available.

In light of this, my first Thesis is this

Thesis 1: To provide an account of agents' political responsibilities to bring about a just transition to an ecologically sustainable world we need an empirically informed account of (1) the political obstacles to such a transition, (2) the political opportunities available, (3) the changing nature of the obstacles and opportunities, and (4) the kinds of political strategies most likely to succeed.

No purely *a priori* speculation about what is the best political course of action.

V: What does this mean in practice for the politics of climate change?

Let's put **Thesis 1** into practice.

§1. What are the Political Obstacles to a Just Transition?

Obstacle 1. One key obstacle is fossil fuel companies (and utilities, labour unions). Obstructionism from those with what Colgan, Green & Hale call "climate-forcing assets".²

- Leah Stokes shows how utilities and fossil fuel companies have delayed, prevented or watered down climate legislation (such as greater use of renewables) in a number of US states (including Texas, Arizona, Kansas and Ohio).³
- Matto Mildenberger has shown how labour unions and fossil fuel companies in the US, Australia and Norway (among other countries) have blocked climate legislation. Carbon, he argues, gets "double representation".^{4 5}

Obstacle 2. A second key obstacle is inertia and carbon lock-in, that is, our economy and our urban infrastructure lock-in dependence on fossil fuels.⁶

Obstacle 3. existing social norms and cultural practices.⁷

Obstacle 4. dysfunctional political systems – ill equipped for global problems.

§2. What are the Political Opportunities to Bring About a Just Transition?

² COLGAN, GREEN & HALE (2021).

³ STOKES (2020).

⁴ MILDENBERGER (2020).

⁵ For more on obstructionism see BRULLE (2018, FORTHCOMING); HESS (2014), GEELS (2014), MENG & RODE (2019).

⁶ See SETO et al (2016).

⁷ See SHOVE, PANTZAR AND WATSON (2012) & FRANK (2020, CH 9).

#1. There are potential coalitions – climate change legislation could enjoy electoral support because of

- (a) Some might favour policies designed to transition away from fossil fuels because they are concerned about air pollution.⁸ Vohra et al report that there are 8.7 million premature deaths per annum as a result of fossil-fuel caused fine particulate matter.⁹
- (b) Some might favour policies designed to transition away from fossil fuels because increasingly people’s lives and livelihoods are being harmed by climate change. They have what Colgan, Green & Hale call “climate-vulnerable assets”.¹⁰
- (c) Some might favour policies designed to transition away from fossil fuels because they are opposed to the extraction and transportation of oil. Think of indigenous rights movements and anti-extractivist movements.¹¹
- (d) Some might support policies designed to transition away from fossil fuels if that leads to the creation of ‘green jobs’
- (e) Some might support policies designed to transition away from fossil fuels if and because policies are designed and implemented that recycle revenues from carbon taxes to compensate them.¹²

#2. Powerful actors within many political systems increasingly support climate legislation:

- (a) insurance companies because they’re terrified about having to make huge payouts;¹³
- (b) many major investors are concerned about assets threatened by climate change. See, eg actions of Climate Action 100+ (including Blackrock and J.P. Morgan).¹⁴
- (c) some companies benefit from climate mitigation regulations because it gives them a competitive advantage over their rivals.¹⁵

#3. Some agents can use the existing legal and political architecture to press for change – (a) climate change litigation and (b) using mechanisms like the “global stocktake”.

§3. Changing Nature of the Obstacles and Opportunities

#1. COVID and lockdowns: given many companies’ financial vulnerability governments have an opportunity to impose aggressive emissions targets on companies as a precondition of any bailout or financial support.

#2. As the climate worsens, those whose financial assets will be harmed by climate change (“climate-vulnerable assets”) will increase and become more vocal.¹⁶

§4. What are the Kinds of Strategies that might be employed?

Srivastav & Rafaty provide a very helpful typology of different strategies:

- #1. “Antagonism” – taking on the fossil fuel industry (divestment, protests, litigation)
- #2. “Appeasement” – compensate (some of) those adversely impacted by climate legislation (eg retraining of workers laid off as a result of climate transition; investment in green jobs)
- #3. “Co-optation” - Work within rules of the game – try to induce those blocking climate legislation not to do so (eg lobbying, campaigning)
- #4. “Institutionalism” - Change rules of the game (eg reforms to lobbying and campaign finance, disclosure of climate risks, binding limits, cut fossil fuel subsidies).
- #5. “Countervailance” – support those seeking to implement clean energy systems (eg invest in renewables, clean tech).¹⁷

VI: But Who has What Political Responsibilities?

⁸ See SCOVRONICK et al (2019, 2021); SHINDELL & SMITH (2019); VOHRA et al (2021); HART & FELDMAN (2021).

⁹ VOHRA et al (2021, p.4).

¹⁰ See COLGAN, GREEN & HALE (2021).

¹¹ See ESTES (2019) & RIOFRANCOS (2020).

¹² See BERGQUIST, MILDENBERGER & STOKES (2020); KLENERT et al (2018).

¹³ See TOOZE (2019A,B).

¹⁴ See CONDON (2020A,B) & TOOZE (2019A,B).

¹⁵ See KENNARD (2020).

¹⁶ See COLGAN, GREEN & HALE, (2021).

¹⁷ See SRIVASTAV & RAFATY (2021). Helpful short description on p.5.

The account that has been developed so far can help answer Q1 on p.1 (on the content of agents' political responsibilities). We have some idea of what needs to be done politically. We need agents who will adopt strategies that

* exploit the opportunities available to (inter alia) construct electoral and other coalitions to create an energy transition, redesign towns and cities

* take on the constraints, such as the cultural practices that support unsustainable patterns of consumption, and the blocking strategies of vested interests (both domestically and globally).

But *who*, we might ask, has *what* political responsibilities? We might know 'what is to be done' but not *who* should do it.

I: Working Back from What Needs to be Done

I will begin with 1st criterion. The goal is a zero carbon world in which the burdens and benefits of realizing that are shared equitably. We should work back from that, asking what would best realize that.

My proposal is this:

Thesis 2: Those with the capability to help bring about a just and ecologically sustainable world have a responsibility to exercise that capability in ways that do not thwart that objective (negative component) and also that further that objective (positive component).¹⁸

The thought: if (in line with criterion 1) we are committed to preventing climate change and doing so requires a radical change in society then there is surely a strong case for thinking that those with the capability to effect the change have a *pro tanto* responsibility to use their power to do so. Since they have this power they have a duty to exercise it responsibly.

But what if an agent lacks power? This takes us to the next thesis:

Thesis 3: Those who lack the capability to help bring about a just and ecologically sustainable world have a *pro tanto* responsibility to join or support a body that does have power (or to create a new one if nothing appropriate is available).

Note that the thinking underpinning **Thesis 2** and **Thesis 3** gives us a steer on another question raised at the start: Which kinds of actors have political responsibilities? The answer is: **All** agents that *either* have 'power' *or* have 'the ability to join/support/augment the power of others' have responsibilities. There might be countervailing considerations that circumscribe how much they can be expected to do but (from the point of view of effectiveness) it is hard to gainsay the thought that with their capacity/power comes a duty to use their power responsibly.

To illustrate:

The thought here is that

- If you are a student then you may lack power but you can (in line with **Thesis 3**) join a body that does have power (a student union or a political party) and augment its power, and
- If you are someone with legal expertise then support/assist/advise legal campaigns litigating fossil fuel companies (eg Urgenda (2019); Milieudefensie/Friends of the Earth Netherlands (2021)); provide legal advice to developing countries
- If you are a worker ... then you can join a union and press it to campaign for green jobs.
- If you have a pension then you can press your pension fund to divest from fossil fuels
- If you're a church (leader) ... then campaign among your members; use your financial resources responsibly. See the Vatican's recent *Journeying Towards Care for Our Common Home: Five Years After Laudato Si* (June 2020)
- If you are a major investor then you can withhold your finances from climate-endangering companies

¹⁸ In an earlier paper I termed this the 'Power Responsibility Principle' (2014).

- If you are an academic ... then you can work with others to make the university more sustainable (including divesting from fossil fuels, going zero carbon, funding research into clean technology)
- If you are a journalist then you can inform citizens of which parties or organizations are supporting the transition to a sustainable world and which not; you can cover work on renewables
- If you work in a central bank ... then you can encourage the bank to put pressure on industries that contribute to climate change and direct funding to clean energy promoting enterprises

And so on

Note 1: This satisfies the Determinacy and Identifiability Criteria. People can read off their responsibilities from their capabilities.

Note 2:

Thesis 4: One implication of the two preceding theses is that the content of an actor's political responsibilities is likely to vary considerably between different actors – because they will have different capabilities; they will face different constraints; and they will have different opportunities available to them.

VII: Looking at it from the Point of View of Putative Duty Bearers

The focus so far has been on what needs to be done (criterion 1), but we should, of course, also take into account the interests of putative duty-bearers (criterion 2). This takes us to the next thesis:

Thesis 5: Any ascription of political responsibilities should not impose excessive burdens on duty-bearers (absolute component) or impose unfair burdens on duty-bearers (comparative component). (criterion 2)

Please insert here your preferred account of just burden sharing. [Familiar Distributive Criteria: (1) those who have caused environmental harm should bear greater share of the burdens; (2) those with the greatest ability to shoulder the burdens should bear greater burdens.]

Note: we might have to balance trade-offs between criterion 1 (protecting the planet and realizing a just sustainable world) and criterion 2 (just burden sharing in the transition).¹⁹

VIII: Taking Stock

So far I have

- proposed a method for deriving the content of political responsibilities. We should figure out what constraints there are to moving to a just sustainable world, what opportunities there are, and design strategies in light of those (**Thesis 1**);
- argued that those with (greater) power or capabilities have (greater) responsibilities to use that to bring about a just transition (**Thesis 2**);
- argued that those who lack power or capabilities have responsibilities to join/support/strengthen agents-that-do-have-power (**Thesis 3**);
- argued that political responsibilities can vary from one agent to another. Different people (union leaders, students, CEO, urban planner, estates manager, student, academic, social influencer, member of religious association, lawyer, ...) will have different responsibilities (**Thesis 4**);
- noted that there are limits on what can be required of people (**Thesis 5**)

We're not done!

IX: Organization, Coalitions and the Creation of Power

Next thesis.

¹⁹ For some thoughts on how to address such trade-offs: CANEY (2016 A,B).

Thesis 6: There is a duty to build coalitions and work in concert with others.

Why?

One lesson of the political science literature is that political success (in passing climate legislation, funding clean energy etc) depends on building coalitions.²⁰ Realizing a just transition will not happen unless environmental actors work in concert. [a corollary of Criterion 1 on effectiveness, then, is that agents have duties to work in concert.]

This has implications within the state and at the global level

* *within the state*: environmental movements need to work together with each other, form alliances with other potential allies ... within limits. Success is not possible without building political coalitions.²¹

* *at the global level*: **Thesis 6** supports the case for ‘climate clubs’²²; for participation in “pledge and review” schemes;²³ and, more generally, for strengthening the “transnational regime complex for climate change”.²⁴

Note, though, that membership of campaigning organizations
and political coalitions brings with its own normative implications.
I here draw attention to two

X: Two Corollaries

§1. The first is this:

Thesis 7: Members of political organizations and coalitions to create a sustainable world have a responsibility to be inclusive and representative

There are two reasons for this

R1: *Epistemic* – political coalitions that seek to create a more sustainable world need to be representative of society more generally, otherwise they are likely to be insufficiently sensitive to all the morally relevant implications of climate politics.

R2: *Political Legitimacy* – political coalitions that purport to speak for humanity have a duty to be representative of that humanity and reflect people’s diverse backgrounds and beliefs. [Some green movements have been criticised heavily on this score.]

§2. To introduce the second consider two points

2.1. *Disagreement*. First, those committed in some sense to avoiding dangerous climate change disagree on many matters. There is disagreement about

- The Target: 1.5, 2?
- The Underlying Causes – some think the root cause is capitalism whereas others seek to preserve and reform it.
- Growth: There is disagreement about economic growth – some call for green growth, other for degrowth
- Policies: Some endorse nuclear energy, others are firmly opposed, some favour carbon taxes, others not, ...
- Political Means: some endorse “contentious politics” others do not

§2.2. *Creating a Coalition*

Political success requires some cooperation and it will be undermined by infighting and fragmentation. There is ample evidence of environmental campaigns failing because of failure to maintain a united front (Hadden 2015; Hale 2020). Given this agents have to find a way to work together and create an effective coalition.

²⁰ ROBERTS et al (2018, pp.305–306).

²¹ See BREETZ, MILDENBERGER & STOKES (2018), HESS (2014), MECKLING et al (2015) & ROBERTS ET AL (2018).

²² See HOVI et al (2017), KEOHANE & VICTOR (2016, p.573) & NORDHAUS (2015).

²³ See KEOHANE & VICTOR (2016, p.574). Thomas Schelling once proposed a scheme like this. See his discussion of what he terms “multilateral reciprocal scrutiny” (SCHELLING 1997, pp.10–12; see also SCHELLING 1992, pp.12–13).

²⁴ See ABBOTT (2014).

A question then arises: But whose views will prevail? How do we reach a sufficiently cohesive coalition?

Answer: Shared platforms have to emerge from fair processes of negotiating disagreement on goals, underlying visions, policy instruments and political means. Hence we're led to

Thesis 8: Members of political organizations and coalitions need to create forms of social cooperation that (a) create sufficient unity and (b) do so on fair terms.

Put differently we face the following two questions:

Q1: How should those committed to combating climate change deal with these disagreements. What is a fair and procedurally legitimate way of negotiating these conflicts? How can we create sufficient unity without diluting the radical transformation that is required?

Q2: When should agents compromise, and when should they not? What constitutes a morally defensible (or even required) compromise? And what not?²⁵

Some Thoughts on How to Address Q2

§1. Thought 1: Do an expected value analysis. Our guiding ideal should be 'what best realizes ecological sustainability with a just distribution of burdens and benefits'. This may counsel compromise in cases where there is no prospect of a more radical option. It may sometimes counsel intransigence if that helps pull others towards a more ambitious goal. There is evidence that some policies (eg feed-in tariffs and renewable portfolio standards) that economists deem to be less efficient than other measures are more politically successful ... and an imperfect policy that is realized is better than a better policy that is never realized.²⁶

§2. Thought 2. One corollary of this is don't be short-sighted. When compromising it is important to avoid

- Climate policies that may reduce emissions now but reinforce the status quo and undermine the prospects of a more radical transformation [a potential example – fracking (reduces emissions compared to oil and coal) but entrenches fossil fuel use and has harmful side-effects.]²⁷

If compromise is required it is best to find common ground on

- Climate policies that both reduce emissions in the existing energy system and that enable (or, more modestly, are consistent with) a more radical transformation in the future.²⁸

§3. Thought 3. It is worth noting that 'working in concert' does not mean 'having a united programme with total agreement on all aspects of what should be done'.

In practice cooperation often takes the form of what have been termed 'advocacy networks' – loose coalitions of separate organizations.²⁹

This enables the possibility of cooperation/working together on the one hand and staying true to their commitments on the other.³⁰ There is some evidence that this can be optimally effective.

²⁵ These dilemmas are not new. See, for example, the debate in the 1980s and 1990s in European Green parties (especially Die Grünen) between the so-called 'realos' and 'fundis'. Or see the long-standing debates in the Left dating back to Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg - if not earlier - on the choice between 'reform' and 'revolution'. Or consider struggles for the eradication of racial injustice. In *Black Power*, Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton draw attention to the perils of forming coalitions and criticise what they take to be the "myths" underpinning some arguments for coalitions, as well outlining the bases for "viable" cooperation (TURE & HAMILTON 1992 [1967], chapter III).

²⁶ See MECKLING et al (2015, p.1170).

²⁷ See NEWELL (2021, pp.6-7).

²⁸ This builds on, but revises, André Gorz's analysis of "non-reformist reforms" (GORZ 1964, p.12). Reformist-reforms operate within the logic of the status quo and militate against more radical reforms. Non-reformist reforms are reforms that facilitate more radical transformation.

²⁹ See KECK & SIKKINK (1998). Some distinguish between 'transnational networks', 'transnational coalitions' and 'transnational movements': SMITH (2008, p.117ff).

³⁰ Note, there's a related dilemma

Thesis 9: Those committed to a just and sustainable world have to determine with whom to cooperate.

Central Point: there's a duty to work in concert and working in concert in turn generates further normative demands (representativeness and inclusive and fair coalition formation).

XI: Concluding Comment

Discussions of climate justice frequently discuss 'what ought to be done' but often shy away from discussing who should bring it about and how. But, who has what political responsibilities to bring about the radical transformation that is required? In this talk I have sketched some answers and, in doing so, I have made a plea for a much closer engagement with the social scientific literature on the politics of climate change.

XII: Background Material

Here are some earlier papers in which I explore some of these or related issues:

'Addressing Poverty and Climate Change: The Varieties of Social Engagement', *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol.26 no.2 (2012), 191-216. [discusses the different ways in which academics can contribute to campaigns to eradicate global poverty and climate change]

'Two Kinds of Climate Justice: Avoiding Harm and Sharing Burdens', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol.22 no.2 (2014), 125-149. [defends the Power/Responsibility (aka Spider-man) Principle ... with great power comes great responsibility.]³¹

'The Struggle for Climate Justice in a Nonideal World', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: Volume XL "Ethics and Global Climate Change"*, vol.XL no.1 (2016), 9-26. [an exploration of nonideal climate justice reasoning - with four illustrations]

'Climate Change and Non-Ideal Theory: Six Ways of Responding to Noncompliance' in *Climate Justice and Non-Ideal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) edited by C. Heyward and D. Roser, 21-42 [~~does~~ tries to do what it says on the tin].

I would very much welcome comments, criticisms and suggestions for improvement.
Thanks!

On the one hand, [a], there are reasons to work with people right across the political spectrum [effectiveness]

On the other hand, [b] there are reasons to draw a line and not work with adherents to some political perspectives [no compromising values of freedom and equality].

The issue: Are there political perspectives with whom one should not form a shared platform?

³¹ Apparently the phrase comes from Uncle Ben in Spider-man.