

Introduction to the Special Issue on Individual Environmental Responsibility

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The present era is increasingly referred to as the Anthropocene: human beings have become a significant global geophysical force, causing massive environmental problems across the planet (Crutzen 2006). Besides the debate on how to respond to this problem at the national and international level, the question of “What should you or I do about climate change?” (Bell et al. in this issue) occurs to environmentally conscious people every time they are presented with the increasingly worse effects of climate change. We take this as the leading question of this Special Issue.

At the beginning of the century, the first political theory accounts framed the issue of individual responsibility in terms of the duties citizens may have towards those most vulnerable to environmental hazards, giving rise to a new understanding of citizenship as ‘environmental citizenship’ or ‘ecological citizenship’ (Dobson 2003, 2006; Harris 2010). These labels were loaded with a wide variety of individual environmental duties, the scope and limits of which were nevertheless unclear. Around the same time, ethicists started debating the existence and content of individual duties, mostly regarding climate change. Despite the substantial body of literature to date, many aspects are still under-explored (Fragnière 2016). This is not least because the topic of individual responsibility for global environmental problems is multifaceted, touching upon several intrinsically complex and controversial issues.

In this contribution, we propose a way to structure this complexity by distinguishing three broad clusters of arguments that address the following questions:

- What (ethical) theory do we need to approach the issue of individual responsibility for global environmental problems?
- What should or must individuals do from an ethical point of view?
- How do real world circumstances matter? Which role do contextual factors play? How important is demandingness?

In the following, we will explain and illustrate these clusters by relating them to exemplary contributions in the literature on individual responsibility and the contributions to this Special Issue.

1. What kind of theory do we need?

The paradigm case of global environmental problems is, rather obviously, climate change. As it is, by now, comparatively well researched, directly or indirectly linked with all other phenomena and raises many complicated questions, the bulk of the scholarly debate circles this issue. Moreover, many of these questions seem rather unprecedented (Moser and Dilling 2007). Spelling out the notion of non-precedence, leading climate ethicists put forward the idea that climate-induced harms constitute ‘new harms’, pointing out that

“these harms are caused by the combined effects of the actions of billions of people, often highly dispersed in space and time, [while] ethical theory evolved in the ‘near range’ of human interaction, dealing with more direct and foreseeable effects of individuals’ actions.” (Lichtenberg 2010; Cripps 2013). Accordingly, or so the argument goes, climate change and global environmental problems call for a new ethics of the Anthropocene (Jamieson 2014).

The first part of this claim, namely, that we are facing new harms, is addressed by the first contribution of Wouter Peeters, Derek Bell and Joanne Swaffield to this Special Issue. They identify two empirical premises on which the “new harms discourse” rests (##page number##). First, conventional moral concepts have developed in small-scale interactions with seemingly unlimited access to natural resources, but this changed during the 20th century. Now, everyday activities affect countless people, and this gives rise to new ethical dilemmas. Peeters et al. object by arguing that the emphasis on a sharp distinction between past and presents conditions of human interaction is empirically mistaken because the interactions have been evolving for much longer and much more gradually. The second premise is that so-called ‘new harms’ are unprecedented as they are the result of large-scale processes, their effects are temporally and spatially remote from their causes and individuals only make an infinitesimal contribution to a large aggregate harm, among others. But discussing slavery and the eighteenth-century air pollution of London reveals that the similarities between these cases and important current problems like climate change are far more significant than the ‘new harms discourse’ purports. If the premises at the basis of the ‘new harms discourse’ are mistaken, allegedly ‘new harms’ do not present unprecedentedly difficult challenges that require radical new thinking. Rather, the “uniqueness myth” (##page number##) generated by the ‘new harms discourse’ distracts attention from the lessons we can draw from humanity’s successes and failures in dealing with past harms. Instead, much can be learned from a careful, interdisciplinary examination of other contemporary and past harms in their historical context. This gives cause for optimism, because it opens up the possibility of drawing upon the past to face problems in the present and future.

Christian Baatz and Lieske Voget-Kleschin’s contribution to this issue remains agnostic on whether climate related harms are new. However, their argument suggests that tackling climate change requires an alternative way to describe how this harm comes about. Specifically, they call for using an alternative theory of causation. This also is the strategy of Mattias Gunnemyr very recent paper (2019). In contrast to Gunnemyr who draws on Lewis (2000), Baatz and Voget-Kleschin draw on a version of the so-called NESS theory (Braham and van Hees 2012). According to this theory, an act is a causally relevant factor for an outcome if it is a Necessary Element of a Sufficient Set of conditions for this outcome. Since NESS does not determine causation counterfactually (‘would X have occurred if I acted differently?’) or via differencemaking (‘does or will my act change the outcome?’) it avoids typical problems of determining individual responsibility for global environmental problems, such as suspension of responsibility in overdetermination and alternate causation cases.

The second contribution by Derek Bell, Joanne Swaffield and Wouter Peeters can be seen as an alternative way to view the agents who together cause the (not so new) harm embodied by climate change. Bell et al. point out that the hypothetical cases commonly used in the climate ethics literature to evoke moral intuitions (or considered judgments) and develop arguments are devised by climate ethicists themselves who necessarily draw on their own experiences. By contrast, Bell et al. propose what they call ‘ethics with an ethnographic sensibility’: They use interviews and an online diary tool to allow ordinary people to describe their lifestyle choices (e.g. had they taken the car or public transport to reach a certain destination) and the opportunities, constraints and incentive structures in which the people make these choices. Bell et al. argue that in doing so they are able to overcome hypothetical, idealized conceptions of moral agents, which are not consistent with our best background theories in psychology and related disciplines.

Relating to the second part of the ‘new harms claim’ (i.e. the need for a new ethics), rather than developing fundamentally new ethical approaches, different scholars explore less well-trodden theories in applied ethics to deal with the complexity of individual responsibility for global environmental problems.

In terms of moral theories, several ethicists have turned to virtue ethics. Virtue ethics was the predominant ethical approach from antiquity to early modern times. While thus not at all new but rather very old, since the 18th century virtue ethics became almost insignificant in the course of secularization on the one hand and the individualization of ideas of the good life on the other. However, since 1980 we have experienced a renaissance of virtue ethics both in terms of ethical theory (e.g. MacIntyre, 1981; Nussbaum 1988) and in terms of applied ethics (e.g. Hursthouse 1991, and in regard to animal and environmental ethics Hursthouse 2006a,b; Sandler and Cafaro 2005). With respect to climate ethics, Jamieson (2007) argues that the best way for utilitarians to address climate change is to focus on virtues. Hourdequin (2010) takes a genuinely virtue ethical perspective in arguing that the virtue of integrity requires moral agents to harmonise their actions at the personal and political level. If an individual of integrity accepts that she should promote collective, institutional solutions to climate change, she should also make efforts to reduce her personal emissions.¹

In this issue, Paul Knights draws on Ronald Sandler’s (2010) work to develop a virtue ethics-based argument that individuals should unilaterally reduce certain forms of consumption, e.g. reducing meat and dairy intake as well as reducing driving and flying.

¹ While this argument hinges on the acceptance of claims to promote institutions, in a footnote, Hourdequin (2010) also envisions a freestanding Aristotelian virtue ethics approach that specifies “the virtue expressed by moderating one’s emissions (and the vices expressed by failing to do so) and places this virtue in larger theoretical context (e.g., explaining the virtue’s relation to a broader theory of the good)” (Hourdequin 2010, 461-462).

According to Knights, justifying that individuals should make such reductions does not require proving that an individual's consumption would cause specific negative effects. Rather, by performing such actions, individuals remain a member of a harming (putative) group. Membership in this group is grounded by the harm caused by the aggregated consequences of these consumption actions. According to Knights, remaining a member of such a group means acquiescing to the harm, being complicit in the harm and approving of or endorsing the practice – all of which are moral wrongdoings according to his virtue-ethics position.

Stijn Neuteleers (in this issue) contributes to issues of moral theory from another perspective, i.e. regarding what it means, and requires, to be a moral person. Neuteleers discusses the importance of non-moral values – what Frankfurt calls “reasons of love” (2009) – for leading a good life but also for being (able to be) moral. According to Neuteleers, duties to reduce one's environmental impact should therefore be limited so as not to encroach on individuals' ability to pursue projects of non-moral value (see also section 3). Furthermore, Neuteleers proposes that rather than understanding efforts to reduce one's individual environmental impact as meeting a duty, it is perhaps better framed as expressing what kind of person one wants to be: “If people think climate change and the environment are important, they look for ways to express this in their lifestyle. The precise overall carbon footprint of such a lifestyle is perhaps of less importance (##add page##).

2. What should individuals do from an ethical point of view?

The second cluster of arguments encompasses controversial issues surrounding specific individual duties. Two debates can be distinguished here. First, whether individuals have duties to reduce their personal environmental impact or whether they only have a duty to promote institutions to reduce our collective impact. Second, whether individuals have duties beyond reducing their present and future environmental impact, i.e., duties to respond to the already existing risks and harms. So far, both debates centre on climate change and this Special Issue contributes to them as follows.

First, most scholars seem to agree that individuals ought to promote just institutions that address climate change at the collective level by changing rules, legal norms and, in the long run, also social norms. Some also highlight that the duty to promote can be accomplished by or may actually require one to reduce one's personal emissions (i.e. emissions one is causally responsible for, which can be rather complicated to determine) (e.g. Neuteleers 2010; Schwenkenbecher 2014; Cripps 2013). A serious controversy developed around the question of whether the duty for individuals to reduce their personal emissions is independent of the duty to promote institutions. That is, are there reasons unrelated to promoting institutions that call for GHG reductions at the personal level?

Such duties are mostly disputed on consequentialist grounds: since individual emissions reductions do not result in morally relevant positive consequences, there is no such duty (Johnson 2003; Sinnott-Armstrong 2005, 2018; Cripps, 2013; Maltais, 2013; Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong 2018). Neuteleers (in this issue) neatly summarizes the main

variants of the consequentialist argument based on Fragnière (2016). Others reject the argument from inconsequentialism, questioning the (empirical) premise or the (normative) conclusion of the argument or both (Kagan 2011; Hiller 2011; Peeters et al. 2015; Lawford-Smith 2016; Fragniere 2018; Lenferna 2018).

Two articles in the Special Issue contribute to this debate. As described above, Knights argues from a virtue ethical perspective that the aggregate harm caused by all individuals' consumption acts together render individuals who consume in this way members of a harming (putative) group. Upholding this kind of consumption means remaining a member of this group. According to Knights, remaining so is an action which fails to be virtuous or is even vicious, independent of whether the consumption act on its own causes any harm. Because of this, Knights' argument circumvents the challenge of inconsequentialism and, notably, holds for other environmental problems such as biodiversity loss and marine pollution.

Baatz and Voget-Kleschin directly tackle inconsequentialism. According to them, important arguments claiming that individual emission reductions do not make a morally relevant difference in fact undermine the case for promotional duties that the arguments' proponents endorse. Subsequently, they integrate the NESS theory described above into a revised version of the fair share argument (Baatz 2014). They conclude that contributing to climate-related harm by emitting can be wrong even if we cannot demonstrate that these emissions caused this or that outcome.

So far, the debate on individual responsibility so far has focused on what (if anything) individuals should do to prevent (additional) future harm by reducing their contribution to that harm and/or by contributing to structural changes that reduce or avoid the imposition of risk and harm in the future.

However, many harms have already materialized. At present, this seems most obvious in the case of climate change, where the accumulation of historical emissions over centuries has resulted in harmful consequences for human and non-human beings – with the much more serious climatic changes ahead. Adapting Henry Shue's seminal concept developed in the context of basic rights (1981), these circumstances give rise to further duties, namely to protect people from harm where they are facing threats and to compensate those that have already been harmed. Regarding climate change, these issues are increasingly discussed, often under the label of "loss and damage" (Mechler et al. 2019). But most scholars adopt a statist, United Nations, or similar collective perspective, e.g. discussing how loss and damage is related to adaptation or how insurance schemes could be designed to manage risks at different levels. Few discuss whether individuals, too, have remedial or compensatory duties.

Eric Posner and David Weisbach (2010) prominently denied such duties because the negative effects of climate change witnessed today are the result of emissions released by past, not by present, individuals. If current individuals did not participate and had no means to prevent past emissions, it seems unfair to make them pay for their consequences (as noted by Caney 2005). This claim has become known as the "dead polluters objection" (Heyward 2010). Contrary to Posner and Weisbach, Baatz (2017) argues that individual

compensatory duties are grounded in individuals' own excessive past and present emissions and to some extent also in other peoples' past emissions. In this dispute, Laura García-Portela (this issue) takes a kind of middle position. Her argument just addresses compensatory duties regarding past emissions (emissions happening before individuals' lifetimes) because she takes it to be the hardest case. While she accepts that individuals do not have compensatory duties strictly speaking (what she calls the straightforward strategy), she argues that they should bear the compensatory burdens allocated to their states (the alternative strategy) for the debt acquired for the overuse of the atmosphere. García-Portela links the debate on ecological citizenship with the philosophical one on individual environmental duties. She rejects Andrew Dobson's claim that ecological citizens have compensatory duties for current and past emissions because of their current ecological footprint (Dobson 2003). García-Portela discusses Dobson's argument, shows it to be untenable and understands her position as solving the problems posed by it.

To avoid the problems resulting from Dobson's account, she denies individual duties of compensation by relying on a description of compensatory justice that requires the existence of a wrongdoing, understood as violation of a time-neutral moral norm (Risse 2008; Thompson 2017). Responding to that wrongdoing requires addressing two components of the injustice: the harm, which is described as the deviation from a just baseline, and the wrong. Individualistic approaches can address the first element of the injustice, but not the second. They cannot properly make sense of important aspects of symbolic compensation (such as acknowledgements and apologies), recognition or extra financial compensation for the wrong. Just intergenerational entities, such as states, can address the wrong because in their case the agent that committed the wrong and the agent responding to it are the same.

For the aforementioned reason, her main argument is that individuals should bear compensatory burdens of their states because they also enjoy the inherited benefits of belonging to them. Unlike other scholars (Duus-Ötterström 2014; Baatz 2013, 2017), she does not argue that the reason for individuals bearing those burdens is because they benefit or enjoy resources coming specifically from past emissions, but rather because they enjoy the overall benefits acquired from the general historical development of their states.

3. Taking real-world issues into account: contextual factors and demandingness

The third debate centres on the question of if and how real-world circumstances matter in what individuals should or must not do. More specifically, how does demandingness bear on the question what individuals should do? And how is demandingness in turn affected by contextual factors? This issue not only arises in the context of duties to reduce individual greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, but duties to promote institutions can become too demanding as well (see Rawls 1999; Neuteleers, Bell et al., Baatz and Voget-Kleschin in this issue). Meanwhile, in this special issue, demandingness is mainly discussed in regard to individual GHG emission reductions.

Knights argues that by failing to refrain from certain consumption acts, one remains a member of a harming (putative) group and that this is not virtuous. To start with, Knights

describes the harming putative group as “the group of individuals who act in such a way that, in aggregate, the consequences of their actions are global climate change, biodiversity loss, marine pollution and all the other global environmental problems that cause so much harm through drought, disease, starvation, extinction and so on.” He discusses two objections to this argument. The second objection is “that withdrawing from the harming putative group may be unduly demanding to the extent that it does not constitute a moral wrongdoing to remain a member” (##add page##). He then moderates the harming group to a subgroup of the larger group by reference to the harm caused by consumption actions “which it would not be unduly demanding to refrain from performing” (##add page##). Accordingly, his argument that individuals should unilaterally reduce their personal consumption only applies to these kinds of consumption actions.

García-Portela limits her account of duties in a very similar way: the payment of the atmospheric debt she demands from individuals is limited by broader considerations of justice, such as whether paying the debt would make people fall under a minimum threshold of sufficiency. Thus, the payment of historically acquired debts is subjected to other contextual factors.

Neuteleers discusses and rejects demandingness as a general counter-argument against individual environmental duties. He argues that demandingness is a plausible interpretation of the intuition held by many, namely that our duty cannot be to change our lifestyle completely. However, in his view, the problem with demandingness is that it cannot provide guidance on its own but must refer to other values. One such value is fairness, namely the idea that I should not do much more than someone else. Another category of values concerns the non-moral values in human lives. According to authors such as Susan Wolf (1982), Bernhard Williams (1981) and Harry Frankfurt (2009), personal projects that give meaning to live should not always be sacrificed for morality. His discussion of the importance of non-moral values leads Neuteleers to propose what he calls an account of expressive rationality, i.e. viewing pro-environmental behaviour as an expression of our pro-environmental values. It is against this background that Neuteleers formulates his central conclusion, i.e. that instead of a well-reasoned account of what individuals ought to do in their private sphere we need an ethos of cooperation and an expressive view of environmental values.

Knights, García-Portela and Neuteleers view demandingness as an important objection to individual duties and formulate arguments that (try to) avoid the imposition of overly demanding burdens in the abstract. By contrast, Baatz and Voget-Kleschin as well as Bell et al. take demandingness as an important starting point for their argument (similarly see Fragnière 2018).

Baatz and Voget-Kleschin present a restatement of the fair share argument. In introducing the concept of fair share they argue that “[a]ll humans need to emit some GHG in order to survive [and to] live a decent life [...] Asking individuals to give up their decent life is an unreasonable demand [i.e. it is unreasonably demanding] Thus, every individual is entitled to emit some GHG” (##add page##). They then designate the amount of GHG every individual is entitled to as her ‘fair share’. Thus, the idea that the duties to reduce

certain emissions would be overly demanding plays a key role in their fair share argument that aims at justifying duties to reduce individual emissions.

The article by Bell et al. constitutes the most encompassing treatment of demandingness in this Special Issue. They ask what role different contextual factors should play in our moral thinking about personal consumption responsibilities. Bell et al. suggest that we should use real-life cases as intuition pumps and to “work towards a wide reflective equilibrium in which our considered moral judgements about these cases are aligned with relevant background theories and a moral theory that identifies the different contextual factors that affect our personal consumption responsibilities”(##add page##). Drawing on empirical data gathered in a pilot study Bell et al. discuss if and when it is too demanding for individuals to abstain from air travel to visit family members. In doing so, they move beyond the general recognition of the importance of context in moral thinking and show that and how contextual factors are not only important for moral thinking in general but above all for issues of demandingness.

To sum up, demandingness is touched upon and plays important roles in most of the Special Issue’s articles. Many open questions still remain in this regard. In addition to those already discussed – how demanding can duties become under non-ideal circumstances (Cripps 2013), whether duties differ between ideal and non-ideal circumstances (Rawls 2003; Stemplowska 2016) – a new question is how to evaluate the demandingness of duties at all. We suggest that devoting time and energy towards a systematic treatment of these questions could thoroughly advance an (environmental) ethics that is relevant here and now.

4. The contributions to this issue

The first article in the Special Issue addresses a general, empirical question: are there new harms at all (Peeters et al.)? It continues with more ‘classical’ contributions that discuss whether individuals have duties beyond the promotion of institutions (Knights, Neuteleers, Baatz and Voget-Kleschin) by drawing on so far underexplored theories.

The Special Issue continues with further broadening the debate by investigating compensatory duties (García-Portela). Finally, it takes up a problem following from most of the issue’s articles: how to determine limits to what we can reasonably demand from individuals while avoiding special pleading (Bell et al.)? Answering this question partially leads back to the social sciences, and thus to where the issue started. At last, here is a short summary of each article:

Wouter Peeters, Derek Bell and Joanne Swaffield critically engage with the claim that many current social and environmental global problems involve ‘new harms’. They identify two key premises associated with this claim and reject both on empirical grounds: first that the conditions regarding whom people affect (and how) have changed recently and differ from past conditions of human interaction; and second that certain features of the ‘new harms’ are not present in ‘conventional harms’. They argue that this ‘uniqueness myth’ distracts attention from the valuable lessons we can draw from humanity’s

successes and failures and illustrate how tackling current harms can be informed by the interdisciplinary study of past harms.

Paul Knights addresses the question of what individuals should do in the face of climate change from a virtue-ethics perspective. According to Knights, individuals who do perform such consumption actions can be viewed as members of a harming putative group. Knights argues that remaining a member of such a group is tantamount to acquiescing the harm that the group collectively causes, being complicit in that harm and approving of or endorsing in the consumption practices – and is therefore not virtuous. Importantly, this argument is independent of the fact that the individual’s consumption acts cannot be causally linked to particular instances of harm.

Stijn Neuteleers contribution takes two opposing intuitions as starting points: the intuition that in the face of global environmental problems such as climate change our lifestyle does matter on the one hand and the intuition that private duties should be limited so as not to be too demanding on the other. In favour of the latter, Neuteleers argues that private actions cannot solve collective action problems and that we should not be obliged to change our lifestyle completely. Subsequently, Neuteleers proposes that the former intuition, i.e. that our lifestyle does matter, is better captured by viewing our lifestyle as expressing our (environmental) values. Neuteleers’ conclusion is that integrating different, opposing intuitions might avoid the adverse reaction that are often the case for private duties, thereby generating broader support for environmental action.

Christian Baatz and Lieske Voget-Kleschin challenge the argument from inconsequentialism in two ways. First, they argue that consequentialist arguments against individual duties undermine the case for promotional duties that the arguments’ proponents endorse. Subsequently, they claim that individuals ought to cut emissions if they exceed their fair share of emissions entitlements and, by emitting, contribute to climate-related harm. In response to inconsequentialism, they specify the notion of ‘contribution’ via the so-called NESS theory, according to which an act is causally relevant for and contributes to an outcome if it is a Necessary Element of a Set of conditions that is Sufficient for the outcome.

García-Portela addresses the question of whether individuals are obligated to provide compensation for climate-related harms that have already occurred. She explores two possible strategies to answer that question. The straightforward strategy answers in the affirmative but is found to be wanting according to her. The alternative strategy proposed by her answers in the negative. Still, although she argues that individual duties do not fall under the realm of compensatory justice, they nonetheless have a duty to bear compensatory burdens allocated to their states based on the atmospheric debt of that state. To the extent that individuals inherit the benefits of belonging to a state, they should also inherit its debts.

Derek Bell, Joanne Swaffield and Wouter Peeters aim to ensure that climate ethics is relevant here and now. They propose ‘climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility’, i.e. to gather first-person accounts of ordinary moral thinking about everyday actions, choices and circumstances and to use these as intuition pumps for normative analysis. To this end, Bell et al. have conducted a pilot study, gathering data in terms of interviews and an online-diary tool. Drawing on two ‘real’ cases from their data that relating to air travel, Bell et al. illustrate how ‘climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility’ allows for more systematic discussion of a broader range of cases and avoids idealizations that compromise the practical relevance of climate ethics.

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