

# IS IT ALL A MATTER OF SELFISHNESS? TOWARDS THE FORMULATION OF MORAL BLAME FOR ANTI-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR

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## **ABSTRACT**

The moral evaluation of actions that disregard climate change, in individual as well as public ethics, is complex. A clear moral judgment itself is difficult to reach in both contexts, as we are far from paradigm moral cases where specific people provoke harm to easily identifiable others. However, for people to seriously engage in climate change mitigation, it has to be clear *why* it is wrong not to do so. There is therefore a need to frame moral responsibility for anti-environmental behavior using language and concepts that are understandable to a broad public. This paper will argue that the concept of *selfishness*, properly construed, is the most appropriate tool for describing and morally evaluating human behavior that disregards climate change. A specific consequentialist definition of selfishness will be provided to this purpose. Some objections to framing the environmental decision in this way will be raised in public as well as individual ethics. In the public sphere, moral deliberations are complicated by the conflict between the rights of the present generation and those of future ones. In individual ethics, the inconsequentiality of individual emissions calls into question the very existence of a moral imperative to act pro-environmentally. The paper will thus investigate the grounds on which we can hold accountable policy makers who refuse to take action on climate change, focusing on the concept of future discounting. With regard to the individual dimension, a proposal will be advanced on the basis of a non-superfluous causal contribution to collective-impact cases. In both contexts, the paper will eventually argue that anti-environmental actions can be defined as selfish according to the definition provided.

## **KEYWORDS**

Climate change, selfishness, future discounting, inconsequentialism.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The moral evaluation of actions that disregard climate change, in individual as well as public ethics, can be controversial. Individuals who intentionally ignore the environmental effects of their actions often seem to act out of selfish motivations. Mitigating climate change is individually costly: it implies lifestyle changes that may (arguably) result in lower living standards, whose reward will be only partially (if at

all) be enjoyed by the individuals who undertake them. Individual self-interest might therefore advise against pro-environmental actions. Similar reasoning seems to apply in the context of international climate negotiations. Committing to cutting greenhouse gas emissions implies high and immediate costs for countries, while the benefits will be globally shared in a non-well-specified future. As underlined by Falkner, investments in low carbon business opportunities have been increasing, and showing their economic potential; furthermore, important co-benefits can be drawn from the investment in a low-carbon economy, for example in terms of air quality, thus improving health. Yet, the cost of decarbonisation will be high, especially in some sectors (Falkner 2016, pp. 1109-1112). For many countries, committing to climate change mitigation might still prove not convenient.

The intertemporal dimension of climate change makes things even more difficult, as causes and consequences of climate change are dispersed not only spatially, but also temporally, providing thus another incentive to non-cooperation. Motivation to take action is in fact significantly undermined, when the consequences of current behaviour are so far in time (Gardiner 2010, p. 91). This contrast between individual and collective interest, and between present and future dimension, contributes to make climate change what Gardiner has called a “perfect moral storm”.

Yet, some objections can be raised to the framing the decisional process in this way. First, in the context of political decision making, environmental policies often imply a conflict between valid moral values that are generally shared by the international community. Such conflict cannot be reduced to the dichotomy between the self-regarding and the other-regarding choice, since it is principally concerned with the tension between the rights of the present and future generations. Second, in the context of individual ethics, it turns out that even the mere attribution of moral significance to individual actions is controversial, due to their not making any difference in the state of affairs.

Standardly, people identify moral guilt with actions committed with the aim of harming others, where actions and people are closely related in time and space. In the case of climate change, those who harm are (for the most part) far in time<sup>1</sup>, and sometimes in space, from those who get harmed, and both the former and the latter are not easily identifiable individuals who act intentionally, as in paradigm moral problems (Jamieson 2010a). What we face is a context where the victims of climate

<sup>1</sup> The intergenerational dimension of climate change leads directly to Derek Parfit’s *Non-Identity Problem*, with which I am not dealing here though. Parfit questions the very idea that we can harm future people, since our present decisions (both of individuals and of policy makers) determine the identity of who is later born. Thus it is not possible to claim that what we do towards the environment harms someone – as that “someone” would not even be born, had we acted differently (Parfit 1984). For the purposes of the present paper, I will assume we have successfully addressed the *NIP*, and that we can legitimately claim that our present behavior can in fact harm future people. One satisfying way to challenge Parfit’s *NIP* can be for example found in R. Kumar (2003).

change are not yet identifiable, nor is the entity of the harm; and no one is unilaterally responsible of it.

Thus, describing anti-environmental actions as merely self-interested, can appear inappropriate, in both public and individual ethics, until we show what is wrong with anti-environmental behavior. However, despite the objections raised, I will argue that the concept of *selfishness*, suitably enhanced, is an appropriate way for describing and morally characterizing human behavior that disregards climate change. Much previous research has been devoted to finding a proper way to morally blame anti-environmental behavior in both the public and private spheres. In the course of this research agenda, many scholars have had to appeal to difficult or counterintuitive arguments. There is therefore a need to frame moral responsibility for anti-environmental behavior using language and concepts that are understandable to a broad public. It is crucial that moral blame in this context is not only tractable to theorize, but also easy to communicate. The current paper aspires to contribute to this objective, by trying to make the terms of moral judgment for who does not contribute to mitigate climate change clear.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 1, I propose a definition of selfishness and show how it seems, at least initially, to be an appropriate way of describing the failure to collaborate on climate change mitigation (section 1). In section 2, I raise some objections to this way of framing environmental decision making and behavior, for both public and individual ethics. In section 3, I investigate the grounds on which we can blame policy makers who refuse to take action on climate change, taking into account the very reasonable claims of developing countries that need to protect their current citizens' rights. I will, specifically, discuss the concept of time discounting, and argue that adopting some forms of it can be defined selfish according to the definition previously provided. In section 4, I focus on the problems of the individual dimension, which is faced with a fundamental challenge regarding the consequentiality of individual actions. In this case, I propose the adoption of a view that focuses on the non-superfluous causal contribution to collective impact cases, and suggest that anti-environmental actions can be defined as selfish according to a suitably-adapted version of the definition provided in section 1.

## **2. SELFISHNESS IN A “TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS” SCENARIO: PRIVATE AND PUBLIC ETHICS**

“Picture a pasture open to all” suggests Garrett Hardin in his seminal paper (1968). We can reasonably expect that “each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. [...] As a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain”. However, as a consequence of everyone trying to maximizing his private gain in this way, the pasture (which is a finite resource) is destroyed. This is the essence of the *tragedy of the commons* (Hardin 1968, p. 1244).

Climate change represents a momentous challenge for humanity. It is widely accepted that if the world does not decisively reduce its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the Earth's temperature will increase to such a level as to cause severe damage not only to the environment, but to human life itself (IPCC 2018). In its essence, the climate-change problem shares many similarities to the tragedy-of-the-commons framework. Collective rationality implies that countries, especially rich ones, should cooperate to reduce emissions. From an individual standpoint, however, it is far more convenient for a single country to stick to business-as-usual and benefit from the emissions reductions of others (Gardiner 2010, p. 89).

In the tragedy-of-the-commons context, an agent who does not cooperate to safeguard a common good is often described as a *free rider*, since she is taking advantage of others' virtuous behaviour. It seems, however, that we cannot properly consider a free rider someone who does not reduce her own emissions, as she would not enjoy the benefits of others' reductions. In fact, the effects of today's emissions cuts will be felt only in the future. For this reason, we need a broader definition for describing anti-environmental behaviour.

We argue here that the simplest way to describe an agent who does not cooperate in mitigating climate change is by calling her *selfish*. We provide a precise definition of selfishness that is suited to our context (Definition (S<sub>1</sub>)). It includes the notion of free-riding, but it is crucially not limited to it, so as to capture the subtleties of the climate-change problem.

(S<sub>1</sub>) An agent is *selfish* when she privileges herself among the other agents involved,<sup>2</sup> in a way that implies a disadvantage for others.<sup>3</sup> The following counts as bringing about a disadvantage:

<sup>2</sup>By "privileging herself" we mean making the choice that one prefers, regardless of its being a rational, irrational, optimal or sub-optimal choice. However imprecise this might seem, the rationality of one's preferred option is not relevant here. This is why I am purposely not adopting the expression - widely used in economics - "maximizing one's interest", that would imply at least a minimum discussion on the exact meaning of "interest maximization", which, as Sen (2002) observed, is a controversial concept, to say the least.

<sup>3</sup>It could be argued that selfishness is not necessarily blameworthy, as there might be cases where *my* putting *my* preferences above others', does not bring about negative consequences for other people (as a - foreseeable - result of my choice). This would apply for example to the case of limitless resources. The crucial variable is, however, perhaps not the *quantity* of a certain resource, but rather its *desirability* in a certain context. If I am the only person who eats fish in a buffet party of vegetarians, I am not being selfish if, being aware of it, I eat all the salmon tarts. My behavior in this case does not affect other people at the party, therefore is not blameworthy. But, at a closer look, it is not even selfish. I would be selfish if I acted in this way in a buffet party of omnivores; or if I ate all the salmon tarts *before* learning about others' preferences. In this last case my action could be defined selfish, but in a way that ultimately is harmless. I shall leave open the question about the grounds on which this last kind of behavior is blameworthy (we might still want to assign blame to it, referring to a deontological principle). I will not go in depth into this, however, as the principle proposed here is consequentialist. I am interested in the kind of selfish behavior that does in fact bring about harm.

- a) harming someone, directly, indirectly<sup>4</sup>, or jointly;
- b) using something, or enjoying a benefit, one is not entitled to, for example, because she has:
  - i. already used her share;
  - ii. failed to contribute to it.<sup>5</sup>

As concerns climate policy at the national and international level, it is well known that the signing of the Kyoto Protocol was followed by a long period of policy stagnation. This lack of progress was mainly due to the conflicting economic interests of the parties involved (Falkner 2016). Many developed countries did not want to commit to severe emission cuts, as they clearly undermined their economic interests, and adaptation to climate change was preferred since it was considered less costly (Singer 2010, p. 185). This kind of behavior can indeed be classified as selfish according to (S<sub>i</sub>): countries privileged themselves among the other agents involved (choosing the most convenient option, i.e. not cutting emissions), in a way that implied a disadvantage for others (i.e. by letting climate change go unabated, they provoked harm to future generations (a)).

Furthermore, according to (S<sub>i</sub>), we can call “selfish” someone who, quoting an example by Peter Singer, continues to put huge amounts of waste down a sink, even though he is aware that the sink has limited capacity and that other people need to use it for their own waste (Singer 2010, p. 187). The atmosphere is indeed not that different from a common sink with limited capacity, where our individual emissions accumulate in such a way as to provoke collective harm. Thus, it seems that individuals who disregard climate change behave as selfish agents, according to (S<sub>i</sub>).

### 3. OBJECTIONS

Things are, however, not this simple. This way of framing the ethical dilemma raised by climate change, as a dichotomy between a selfish and a somewhat “selfless” choice, might seem, at a closer look, to fall short of the moral complexity of the issue. It seems to capture only the surface of the problem, and to oversimplify decisional processes that are far from simple. From a *public-policy* point of view, choices regarding environmental policy are often characterized by a conflict be-

But I acknowledge that there are contexts in which one can act in a selfish way, without causing harm to anyone in the sense described by (S<sub>1</sub>).

<sup>4</sup> It is included in the concept of indirect harm a particularly relevant aspect of it: the very fact of not leaving enough of something for others (which has been extensively discussed in Singer (2010), with reference to John Locke and Adam Smith.

<sup>5</sup> The definition of free-riding is captured by b) ii.

tween morally sound arguments, instead of a conflict between selfishness and selflessness. From the *individual* perspective, many scholars argue that the choice regarding pro-environmental action cannot even be classified as a moral choice.

In the context of *public policy*, the desirability of different measures is not easily reduced to a conflict between a selfish and a selfless view. Since the Kyoto protocol's signing and failed implementation, different principles have been discussed among climate negotiators. Countries have often appealed to equity, yet referring to very different concepts, such as equity of opportunities, equal commitment for a common goal, the acknowledgement of differentiated responsibilities, and stronger commitment by richer "actors". These different conceptions of equity frequently gave rise to opposing policy proposals, and were formulated in a "self-serving" way (Lange et al. 2010, pp. 6-8). However, we cannot easily blame this state of affairs on selfishness. The main problem is that every agreement implies costs, which in many cases imply the deprivation of basic rights. Most commonly, they bring to the fore a conflict between the rights of the current and future generations. For instance, developing countries defend their right to economic development without restrictions on emissions, as this would contribute towards significantly lowering mortality. Developed countries, on the other hand, defend the rights of workers employed in polluting industries whose survival would be jeopardized, should an aggressive emission reduction scheme be implemented (e.g., coal mining).

The conflict could therefore be described in the following terms: the right of future generations to a healthy natural environment vs. the current generation's right to subsistence, work, and many other rights that depend on them. It is not immediate to see whether the current generation can therefore be called selfish according to (S<sub>i</sub>).

In the case of *individual action*, the main objection to the adoption of the concept of selfishness here proposed is that the very possibility of talking about harm as a consequence of individual action is controversial. Many philosophers contend that individual emissions make no difference to the state of affairs since they are too small to have a direct effect on the global climate (Sinnott-Armstrong 2005; Sandberg 2011; Sandler 2010). If this is the case, individual action is, in itself, harmless. Therefore the definition of selfishness provided, being consequentialist, would be of no use.

Does this assessment change if we consider individual action as part of a broader joint action? Let us go back to Peter Singer's sink. When I formerly claimed that "we behave as selfish agents, if we overuse the capacity of the atmosphere", indeed I referred to what individuals do *together*, which could allow to claim, following a), that we simply face a case of joint action, where everyone provokes harm not individually, but jointly. Individual actions could therefore be blamed as being part of a group of actions, that together cause harm (following Parfit 1984). However, the individual might respond that, as *her* action does not cause any harm, *she* is not part

of that group (Sandberg 2011). Nor, she could add, does she share any kind of like-mindedness with that group, which could constitute grounds for considering her a member of it, and thus responsible for its actions (following Miller 2007). The context resembles more what Gilbert calls a mere “aggregate” of people, where single individuals cannot be blamed for the aggregate’s actions (Gilbert 2006).

The above objections do not, in my view, imply that we should abandon the idea of morally framing our blame for anti-environmental actions in terms of selfishness. They only show that we need a richer theoretical apparatus for determining moral responsibility.

#### **4. MORAL BLAME FOR POLICY DECISIONS: THE FUTURE DISCOUNTING ARGUMENT**

Let us consider some anti-environmental actions, borrowing again from Peter Singer. Cutting a forest, or drowning it for building a dam to create electricity may in fact bring some advantages in terms of employment, rural electrification, agriculture, etc. (Singer 2011, p. 242). Yet these benefits are all strictly local and short-term and will concern just a few generations, while preserving the environment may be less advantageous in the short run, but will bring long-term benefits not just to the environment itself, but to many other variables that significantly influence humans’ wellbeing.

Or let us imagine we are in charge of a developing country’s government. We have the opportunity of pursuing very fast development that would significantly ameliorate the living standards of our people. This fast development is entirely based on fossil fuel combustion. The high development rates would last for some years, and would definitely bring benefits for the local current generation. But in the medium/long term, fossil fuels will be exhausted, and climate change impacts will start to hit our country and eventually other countries as well. Sustainable development, on the other hand, would take place at much slower rates. Its effects will be primarily felt in the medium/long-term, and might not be perceived by the current generation. Since it is not based on fossil fuel combustion, it will constitute a durable and solid path for progress. And the benefits of it will not just be local – they will spill over to the whole climatic system.

There is one thing these examples suggest: anti-environmental actions are characterized by time discounting. Time discounting is that principle according to which economists discount the value of future consumption – something that is legitimate, as indeed goods that are sold in markets in most cases lose value over time (Broome 1994, p. 128). The same principle can be applied to the evaluation of the moral importance of future events, which is taken to decline at a constant rate (Parfit 1984, p. 480). Discounting the future means, in other words, to focus on the short-term,

attaching greater weight to benefits and losses immediately available and enjoyable, while valuing less the same benefits and losses that will take place in the future.

Simon Caney has provided an interesting analysis of the reasons why time discounting, when applied to climate change to justify the lack of immediate mitigation, has no moral basis. He argues that, when applying pure discounting to people's well-being, we are implicitly attributing a "fundamental moral importance" to people's location in time, thus prioritizing the well-being of those who are currently alive, while penalizing those who are born later for *no other reason* than their being born later (Caney 2014, pp. 4-5). Therefore, by failing to mitigate climate change, we apply a positive discount rate in a way that is morally wrong. We grant to ourselves the benefits of not paying for cutting emissions, while we have future generations not only bear the costs of mitigation, but also suffer climate change's harmful consequences.

If we frame the issue in this way, it seems that the behavior of countries that do not mitigate emissions is selfish according to (S<sub>i</sub>). In other words, if we want to blame countries' current emitting behaviour, we need to adopt the perspective of intergenerational justice. What might be considered a fair political action if we considered only current generations, especially when emissions are needed for bringing a country at a minimum level of development, might look extremely wrong if we consider its effects on future people.

Yet, some further thinking is needed, as we cannot ignore developing countries' claim to development. We cannot easily blame developing countries that desperately try to reach some minimum threshold of wellbeing, necessary to increase their population's survival rate.

Caney's proposal may be of help here. At times, he observes, the adoption of time discounting is justified on the grounds that, since future generations will be wealthier than us, it makes more sense to have the "rich" (i.e. future generations) bear the costs of climate change mitigation, instead of "the poor" (the current generation). This particular kind of discounting is referred to as *growth discounting*. Growth discounting can give rise to two different proposals regarding present government policy. The first is to simply *delay action*, as, it is thought, future generations will be richer, will have access to more advanced technology, and cutting emissions will be to them much cheaper than it is to us. As Caney observes, this solution raises a number of problems, of which I just mention some: i) we know from the IPCC reports that "there are limits to the extent to which the destruction of natural resources can be addressed by the substitution of capital and human resources"; ii) there are also epistemic limits: we do not really know what is it going to happen as effect of climate change; iii) successfully addressing climate change (with both mitigation and adaptation) does not depend on wealth alone: it also depends on the stability, responsiveness and commitment of political institutions (ivi, p. 11).



The second proposal that arises from growth discounting is not to delay action, but rather to *defer its costs*. It is undeniable that many people in the world lack access to energy, and as a consequence face severe deprivations. It would be unfair to prevent them from reaching some minimum standards of living via the imposition of severe emissions cuts. But this does not imply that emissions should proceed unabated. Instead, Caney suggests that developing countries could borrow money from the future generations (thus “deferring the costs of mitigation”) and purchase clean technology, in order to develop sustainably. As future people will be wealthier than us, this solution does seem fair, as it tries to reach some sort of equity between the rights of current and future people (ivi, pp. 14-16).

Using Caney’s argument, we can claim that the kind of growth discounting that only requires the deferment of the costs of climate change mitigation, thus addressing the basic needs of the current generation, is not blameworthy. Instead, time discounting based on the concept of delaying action *is* blameworthy. And it turns out that it can be defined “selfish” according to (S<sub>i</sub>): delaying action attributes greater moral value to the current generation, thus damaging the next one in all senses of bringing about harm included in a) and b). In fact, not mitigating climate change harms future people (Jamieson 2010b, pp. 266-271); it also implies the destruction of natural resources, thus not leaving enough of them for others (Singer 2011, pp. 218-219); and finally it overuses the capacity of the atmosphere at one’s proper advantage, having already well used one’s fair share (Singer 2010, p. 189).

## 7. MORAL BLAME FOR INDIVIDUAL ACTION: THE “HELPING” PRINCIPLE

Unlike political action undertaken by governments, individual actions in the climate context suffer from inconsequentiality. The assignment of individual moral responsibility must therefore rely on a different set of arguments.

The definition of selfishness provided in Section 1 uses consequentialist reasoning to justify blame for selfish individuals (see note 3). This does not mean that we cannot try to blame individuals who disregard climate change on other grounds, adopting for instance a deontological approach and abandoning the framing of the moral blame according to (S<sub>i</sub>). Yet, deontological arguments have not been particularly successful. The possibility of adopting a pure Kantian a priori principle in this context has been generally rejected. The main problem is that this principle focuses on the intentions that generate actions, and, in the case of climate change, individuals may have absolutely genuine intentions while they use their cars, take a plane, eat meat and buy unseasonable food (Sinnott-Armstrong 2005; Jamieson 2007; Sandler 2010).

Marion Hourdequin has provided an interesting deontological argument for defending the duty of individuals to cut emissions that is based on the idea of the moral

integrity of the subject. Her argument proceeds as follows: many have argued that, since individual actions do not affect climate change, what people need to do is to focus on the collective dimension of the problem. In particular, they must try to generate public engagement and to work for a collective agreement, instead of taking potentially unilateral (and therefore useless) action as individuals (Hourdequin 2010, pp. 444-447). Yet, those who accept the existence of some kind of obligation towards climate change cannot dismiss the individual dimension: moral integrity requires a corresponding individual engagement in cutting emissions (ivi, p. 448). Furthermore, Hourdequin emphasizes the importance of coherence for people who are engaged in climate change mitigation at the political level. To ensure credibility and political influence, their political commitments should be in line with their private behavior (ivi, pp. 449-451).

Two things ought to be underlined about Hourdequin's proposal: i) the main argument about moral integrity presupposes the existence of already committed individuals. It argues for the necessity of individual emission reductions, instead of focusing just on political action. What I am interested in, however, is to determine the moral responsibility of those who do not engage in climate change mitigation at all (not people who are engaged publically but not in private). ii) Hourdequin, when highlighting the potential influence of individual pro-environmental behavior, *de facto* adds a consequentialist consideration.

A theory that determines individual duties towards climate change must address the problem of inconsequentiality, as it permeates the whole dimension of individual behavior. Indeed, the inconsequentiality argument may be adopted even for refusing to commit on the political level. Not only each single vote for a "green" party does not make any difference to its election (except in the extremely unlikely case of a tie), but also each *individual* action in support of national and international environmental policy is not making a difference to that policy's success<sup>6</sup> (Sandler 2010, p. 169). Furthermore, the objection to a Kantian-like deontological principle is a powerful one, in the context of climate change, as it is true that most people do not *intend* to cause any harm when polluting mindlessly. And if we want to assign blame to this negligent behavior, we need an argument that explains what is wrong with it, which leads ultimately to explain why individual action *is* relevant on consequentialist grounds.

Let us go back to (S<sub>i</sub>). I claimed that an agent is selfish "when she privileges herself among the other agents involved, in a way that implies a disadvantage for others". Is an ignorant person being selfish? According to the popular view of Vanderheiden, she is, for the following reason. There is a great wealth of available

<sup>6</sup> We are of course referring to standard citizens: not to political actors, or people with particular visibility, such as actors, singers, etc., whose public engagement in climate change may generate significant results.

scientific knowledge about climate change and much of it is widely disseminated in the popular press. Ignoring it implies some form of wilfulness (Vanderheiden 2007, p. 91), at least for people living in western countries. And deliberately ignoring global problems such as climate change, either because one thinks someone else will/ought to take care of it, or because its effects will be felt by other people (either distant in space, or in time, or both), or because one simply does not care about what happens beyond her sphere of interests, *is* selfish. It implies living as if nothing but one's own wellbeing was important, which is a way of "privileging oneself" (first clause of (S<sub>1</sub>)). Still, until we show that someone's "privileging herself" has *consequences*, it could be still a case of "blameless selfishness", where someone's deliberate ignoring of global issues seems harmless (see note 3, where I described possible cases of harmless selfishness).

Many scholars have tried to show how individual contribution to collective impact cases such as climate change can be morally significant in virtue of their *consequences*. John Nolt (2011), followed by Avram Hiller (2011), have tried to calculate the emissions produced by a single individual in her lifespan, and show that, far from amounting to zero, they can produce a restricted, yet tangible, damage to someone. This argument has however been criticized, as the harms raised by individual emissions are such only if combined with other people's emissions, not on their own. Elizabeth Cripps has claimed that there is no point in insisting this much on the individual contribution to climate change, as what really counts, is the collective dimension (Cripps 2013).

There are many other ways through which scholars have tried to attribute responsibility for climate harms even to individuals. Pellegrino has gone in depth with the concept of causation, arguing that, first, we need to adopt a contributive concept of causation, according to which an act can increase the probability of an event, without it being dependent on it (thus rejecting the idea that causality needs dependency<sup>7</sup>).

<sup>7</sup> According to Pellegrino, individual emissions cause climate change in the following sense: "An actual event causally contributes to the occurrence of another actual event when, had the former not occurred, the latter would have been less likely to occur. An actual individual emission causally contributes to the occurrence of climate harms when, had the individual emission not occurred, some specific climate harms would have been less likely to occur. The degree to which some specific climate harm would have been less likely to occur is a measure of the size of the individual emission's causal contribution. Individual emissions may give increasing contributions depending on their vicinity to the tipping point beyond which a relevant threshold of greenhouse gases concentration is exceeded. If causation is not analyzed as a form of dependence, then this view of gradual causal contribution can be plausible enough. A theory of causal contribution, then, needs an account of causation which is not based on the notion of causal dependence, as it appears in standard counterfactual accounts" (Pellegrino 2018, p. 818).

We need at this point to get rid of one of the main objections that can be raised: that someone's individual emissions are not part of the set of emissions that, together, cause climate harm. Pellegrino suggests to adopt a concept of *robust responsibility*, namely, responsibility for what someone's emissions may cause in *close possible worlds*. In his words, "robust responsibility is the idea that in the actual world the individual emitter is liability responsible for climate harms because her counterpart in a very close possible world is causally responsible for harms in that world. Responsibility is robust, i.e. it holds across close possible worlds. [...] The thought is that any individual emission could have had a causal impact on the climate harms occurring in the actual world. This is enough to regard individual emitters in the actual world bound to take precautions." (Pellegrino 2018, pp. 818-820).

A perhaps more convincing argument has been raised by Julia Nefsky, who has justly observed that the *causal involvement* of individual actions in contexts of collective impact (to which climate change belongs) is not what ought to be proved: it is rather the argument's starting point (Nefsky 2017, p. 2750). If a certain candidate wins the election, this is due to single acts of voting. If climate change occurs, this is also due to the aggregation of single emissions.<sup>8</sup> Yet, simple causal involvement may still be not enough: the crucial point is to show that individual behavior plays a *non-superfluous* causal role in bringing about some collective aim, even when one's contribution *does not make a difference* in the state of affairs. This may seem counter-intuitive: if my behavior does not make any difference in producing an outcome, it seems that such behavior is by definition superfluous. And a superfluous behavior is also morally neutral. Nefsky's argument tries precisely to challenge this standard intuitive assumption.

The reasoning adopted is the following: "Suppose your act of X-ing could be part of what causes outcome Y. In this case, your act of X-ing is non-superfluous and so could help to bring about Y if and only if, at the time at which you X, it is possible that Y will fail to come about due, at least in part, to a lack of X-ing" (Nefsky 2017, p. 2753). Following this reasoning, for each individual agent it is possible to claim that, in refusing to cooperate to reducing emissions, she is contributing to bringing about a harm through her non-superfluous causal role. This is clearly less strong than directly causing a perceptible harm, but it is different from not causing any harm at all.

If we accept that individual emissions make climate change worse, through this special form of causal involvement that does not rely on single acts making a difference, we satisfy also the second clause of (S). We might formulate a more precise

<sup>8</sup> At this point someone could argue that it is not individual consumptions, even in the aggregate, that cause climate change. Rather, it is industries, or our countries' political decisions that are responsible. However, this is simply not true, as it has been estimated that up to 40% of emissions arise from decisions taken by individuals - travel, heating, and food purchase (Liverani 2009).

definition of what accounts for a selfish behavior of individuals in collective impact cases:

(S<sub>2</sub>) An agent is *selfish*, when she privileges herself among the other agents involved, in a way that *helps bring about* a disadvantage for others. The following count as bringing about a disadvantage:

- a) harming someone, directly, indirectly, or jointly;
- b) using something, or enjoying a benefit, one is not entitled to, for example, because she has:
  - i. already used her share;
  - ii. failed to contribute to it.

We can therefore claim that individuals who fail to contribute to climate change mitigation act in a selfish way according to (S<sub>2</sub>).

## 8. CONCLUSION

This paper does not pretend to have the final word on the moral complexity of the decisions raised by climate change. Nor does it argue that, once a clear moral judgement is reached, an *overriding* motivation to act pro-environmentally is necessarily generated. It does not address the debate on motivational judgement, where *judgement internalism* claims that motivation is internal to moral judgement, whereas *externalism* rejects the necessity of a connection between moral judgment and motivation (Rosati 2016, § 3.2).

The assumption on which this paper is built is that the attribution of moral responsibility can provide a motivation to act on climate change, but not necessarily an overriding one. Therefore, it does not discuss the relative strength of this moral motivation, when compared to other reasons for acting on climate change. It is important, however, to have clear and understandable terms for assigning blame to anti-environmental behavior.

Policy makers could draw different implications from this framing. Claiming that those who refuse to cut emissions are acting selfishly would be no novelty for rational choice theory that describes human beings as self-interested actors, not keen to cooperate when cooperation is not convenient to them. Therefore it might seem that it is better to just “make use” of people’s tendency to favor themselves. Following Ridley and Low, maybe policy makers should abandon the idea to appeal to people’s better nature and altruism, accept a more cynical view on human beings, and use laws, sanctions, and even shame to force individuals, industries and nations to engage in good environmental practices (Ridley and Low 1993, p. 86). Or, following a recent suggestion by Peeters and co-authors, the public discourse on environmental policy should avoid describing environmentally responsible behavior in terms of self-sacrifice, but rather emphasize the “intrinsic satisfaction” it provides, focusing on non-material aspects of well-being (Peeters et al. 2019, p. 17).

But human beings are not only selfish. As Jon Elster has put it, selfishness is simply “logically prior to non-selfishness”, as “the pleasures of altruisms logically presuppose the pleasures of selfishness, but not vice versa” (Elster 1985, p. 145). This, however, does not imply that selfishness is necessarily the most frequent motivation of human beings (ivi, p. 146) as agents may be motivated by altruism, or by a sense of moral duty (ivi, pp. 148-149). Amartya Sen has further observed that there are even cases in which people deliberately give up their preferences or personal interest, just in order to let other people pursue *their own* goals. We self-impose rules of decent behavior even when doing so does not enhance our own well-being, but rather that of people with whom we are sharing the world (Sen 2009, pp. 32-33). Humans are not only selfish, myopic creatures, claims Sen. Even the coincidence of interest maximization and rationality is mistaken. Many people *rationaly* act against the maximization of their personal interest; indeed, altruistic goals and the consideration of other people’s well-being can ground a perfectly rational choice (ivi, pp. 192-193).

If we follow Sen, we have reason to hope that appealing to altruism, to that inextinguishable tendency to care not only for oneself but for others alike, is not necessarily a strategy condemned to fail. Indeed, we have many examples of people who commit to various degrees to completely altruistic goals. Millions of people in the world voluntarily try to reduce their environmental footprint, without any kind of reward. Even in the context of climate treaties, we have an excellent example of voluntary commitment, with Europe unilaterally committing to strong emission reductions within the Paris agreement (Falkner 2016).

In conclusion, by emphasizing the selfish nature of not contributing to climate change mitigation we simply wanted to put in clear words a traditionally difficult-to-formulate moral judgment. If the terms of moral blame are confused, or too technical to be comprehensible by a general public, people are likely to feel less motivated to deal with the problem.

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