Climate Change and Complacency

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In this paper I engage interdisciplinary conversation on inaction as the dominant response to climate change, and develop an analysis of the specific phenomenon of complacency through a critical-feminist lens. I suggest that Chris Cuomo's discussion of the "insufficiency" problem and Susan Sherwin's call for a "public ethics" jointly point toward particularly promising harm-reduction strategies. I draw upon and extend their work by arguing that extant philosophical accounts of complacency are inadequate to the task of sorting out what it means to be complacent on climate change. I offer a sketch for an alternative account, which I take to be a start in the direction of mapping out a diverse array of "motivational vices" that need to be named, grappled with, and (hopefully) remedied.

Climate scientists, social scientists, and environmental ethicists have issued dire warnings. Current global greenhouse gas emissions trajectories exceed the worst-case scenario envisioned in the fourth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2007), making it unlikely that the global average temperature will be held to a 2°C increase over preindustrial levels given present mitigation efforts. Societies are already coping with unusually frequent and intense weather events (heat waves, cold spells, "supercharged" storms), ecological disturbances (melting glaciers, rising sea levels, floods, droughts, wildfires), pressures to modify traditional agricultural practices, and compromised food and water security. Current inaction has prompted experts to consider even more dangerous scenarios involving more than 3 or 4 degrees of warming (Smith et al. 2009). These scenarios force societies to face devastating collapses of social and technical infrastructure, forced displacements and relocations of peoples, conflicts over lands and resources, and escalating losses of life.

Although climate change is undoubtedly a physical phenomenon, as the editors of this special issue emphasize, it is one built on complex social and political understandings and responses. Its origins and impacts cannot be understood without taking into account complex histories of the transformation and domination of lands and of peoples under settler colonialism and other imperialist systems of rule, propelled by

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capitalist imperatives of economic growth and white supremacist, heteropatriarchal social orderings. Indeed, the causes, benefits, and burdens of environmental degradation have rarely been parceled equally. Much less can climate change be understood in isolation from current patterns of socioeconomic inequality and political disempowerment that stand to be exacerbated in societies structured and expressed spatially along lines of gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, race, age, and ability (Goldberg 1993, ch. 8; Anthony 1995; Pulido 2000; Westra and Lawson 2001; MacGregor 2010). As Chris Cuomo stresses, "climate change is a matter of global social justice" that is already intensifying the ecological and social vulnerabilities of large portions of the world's population, in many cases "precisely because they uphold ecological values that have not been engulfed by global capitalism and technological modernization" (Cuomo 2011, 693, 695).

Sorting out the responsibilities to be assigned and assumed in responding to climate change is a task that calls for broad-based participation. However, delegations from nation-states have persistently failed to elaborate and execute long-term coordinated response strategies, and surveys and polls suggest worrisomely low levels of public engagement within nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Nisbet and Myers 2007; Leiserowitz 2008; Upham et al. 2009; Newport 2010; Leiserowitz et al. 2011). These motivational challenges are particularly pressing in nations that have historically been among the highest emitters of industrial greenhouse gasses, and that continue along unsustainable pathways of resource extraction, production, consumption, and waste. In spite of detailed documentation of the role of corporate campaigns in promoting skepticism by generating misunderstandings of climate change (Hoggan 2009; Jacques 2009; Oreskes and Conway 2010), reverberating through conversations on what is commonly called the "problem of inaction" or the "value-action gap" among communications specialists (Moser and Walser 2008; Moser 2009; 2012), social psychologists (APA 2009; Gifford 2011), social scientists (Eliasoph 1998; Blühdorn 2007; Norgaard 2011; Webb 2012), and geographers (Bulkeley 2000; Swyngedouw 2010), these motivational challenges remain puzzling. As political sociologist Ingolfur Blühdorn notes, "Trying to *make sense* of the evident contradiction between late-modern society's acknowledgement that radical and effective change is urgent and inescapable and its adamant resolve to sustain what is known to be unsustainable is a hugely important and difficult task" (Blühdorn 2007, 272). Meanwhile, accusations abound of widespread apathy, ignorance, denial, and—to the point of my paper—*complacency*. Charges of this sort signal that there is nothing benign about resting content with the status quo, passively allowing for the formation of misinformed, imprudent, and ethically suspicious policies and practices.

What exactly does it mean to be "complacent on climate change"? Getting a better handle on diverse forms of what we might think of as "motivational inertia" seems crucial to furthering the political project of reducing the harms of climate change. I take it that the unprecedented nature of the problem calls for the reinvention of concepts that help us hold ourselves and others accountable in meaningful ways. For this reason I want to help make "complacent" a weighty *political* charge—a

charge that, along with "corrupt" and "cruel," picks out a "vice" that we need to work on remedying.

To be clear, complacency is one of several forms of motivational inertia standing in need of philosophical attention: apathy, indifference, resignation, and despair have all been subject to neglect (although see Geras 1998; Tessman 2005, ch. 4). Although I am interested in developing an account of the specific phenomenon of complacency, I propose that philosophers should understand multiple forms of motivational inertia from within a general framework of *motivational vices*. Further, there is cause to view these as species of what Lisa Tessman calls "ordinary vices of domination" (Tessman 2005, 54–79). Very roughly, a person should be seen as in the grips of a motivational vice when the ways she has been constituted as a moral agent prevent her from inquiring into, understanding, and responding well to a range of complex ecological and social problems. Although the broader vision of vice I espouse is indebted to more traditional treatments of virtues and vices, it is distinguished by its focus on the relational dynamics and structural processes that foster, sustain, and enforce various forms of motivational inertia.[1] For this reason, I will draw upon and extend the work of feminist ethicists, critical philosophers of race, and moral psychologists, especially those who take relational and structural approaches to understanding human motivational capacities (Campbell 1997; 2003; Walker 2007; Downie and Llewellyn 2012) and the epistemic practices of situated agents (Mills 1997; Code 2006; Sullivan and Tuana 2007).

I proceed as follows. In section I, I take up the recent work of Chris Cuomo and Susan Sherwin on the ethical and political dimensions of climate change. I suggest that Cuomo's discussion of the "insufficiency" problem and Sherwin's call for a "public ethics" jointly point toward particularly promising harm-reduction strategies. In section II, I review extant philosophical treatments of complacency, before going on to argue that Nicholas Unwin's and Jason Kawall's accounts are inadequate to the task of sorting out what it means to be complacent on climate change. In section III, I offer a sketch for an alternative account. To anticipate: although complacency is commonly thought of in terms of feelings of "self-satisfaction," I argue that regardless of an agent's self-directed feelings and explicitly held beliefs, they are complacent on climate change insofar as they are caught up in patterns of behavior that express *settled expectations of self-sufficiency*. Examining the phenomenon of complacency through a critical-feminist lens, I chart relationships between motivational inertia, privilege, and power by considering the circumstances under which changes in behavior and lifestyle are promoted and pursued as suitable responses to complex ecological and social problems. I also put into question depictions of complacency as a product of epistemic negligence for which individuals are solely and wholly responsible, and as a vice that individuals might "overcome" on their own, resisting the temptation to reduce complacency to ignorance or denial. Recognizing the urgent need to work collaboratively toward sustainable societies, those who are eager to be "shaken out of" complacency on climate change should not expect their journeys to be easy, or to take place overnight, worthwhile though they may be.

I. Publicizing Climate Ethics

No individual can even begin to slow climate change by reducing her own personal and household greenhouse gas emissions, even if she recognizes an ethical responsibility to do so. To make matters worse, should the vast majority of individuals and households the world over manage to drastically reduce their privately controlled emissions (changing light-bulbs, recycling more, and so on), their collective efforts would still be inadequate. Cuomo dubs this the “insufficiency” problem (Cuomo 2011, 701). Her recent work highlights the “rarely emphasized fact” that “household consumption and personal transportation account for a significant but minority slice of total greenhouse gas emissions worldwide,” which means that, “Even if personal sphere reductions that can be directly controlled by individuals and households are ethically imperative, they are insufficient for adequate mitigation” (701).

Indeed, mitigating climate change is an extremely complex practical challenge that cannot be met solely through the efforts of ethically conscientious individuals acting qua individuals. It is a *political* challenge in addition to an ethically and practically demanding one, which is to say that citizens of industrialized nations are called upon to exercise political agency in recognition of responsibilities we share with others worldwide (Young 2011). Especially weighty claims have been pressed on citizens of Western nations that have contributed the most to producing the industrial greenhouse effect over the last century and a half, and that continue along unsustainable pathways of resource extraction, production, consumption, and waste.. When government and corporate agents in high-emitting nations persistently refuse to acknowledge their roles in causing climate change, and decline to take responsibility for addressing the problem, Cuomo suggests that for concerned citizens, “political activism, popular education, and effective coalitions may be even more important than private-sphere mitigation efforts such as reducing one’s own carbon footprint” (Cuomo 2011, 707).

Cuomo’s argument should give us pause for at least two reasons. First, many people living in the West have grown accustomed to the individualization of responsibility for addressing climate change. As sociologist Janette Webb points out, it is not only environmentalists who have been pushing the idea that changing a light, recycling more, and planting a tree are particularly effective ways of slowing climate change and of transforming into environmentally conscious citizens. The prevalence of these recommendations must be understood in the context of neoliberal micro-economic governance in nations such as the US, the UK, and Canada, where common tactics include deploying behavior-change technologies to enable the transformation of individuals into “green consumers,” while offering incentives (for example, differential government funding; investment options with energy firms) to induce the cooperation of environmentalist groups. One effect is that consumers are encouraged to develop the capacity for performing “carbon-calculus,” internalizing the long-term environmental costs of their purchasing behaviors (Webb 2012, 116; cf. Szasz 2011). By coming to make more informed decisions in “markets designed to associate satisfaction, prestige and self-worth with increasing consumption of carbon-intensive products” (Webb 2012, 119), green consumers are led to see themselves as

undergoing profound lifestyle changes. Meanwhile, because the demands placed on individuals' limited cognitive resources "leave little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society" (Maniates 2001, 33), the basic lesson absorbed through this mode of governance is that "we have to change radically, but within the contours of the existing state of the situation… so that nothing really has to change" (Swyngedouw 2010, 219). On the basis of her case study of Scotland, Webb argues that these tactics allow "the work of governance to proceed seemingly productively" (expert behavioral knowledge is guiding public policy; some people have become carbon-calculators), while ultimately offering "limited and largely self-defeating means of transition to a sustainable society" (Webb 2012, 121).

Second, engaging in political activism, popular education, and forging effective coalitions need not mean struggling to create alternatives to unsustainable policies through suitably democratic processes. Eric Swyngedouw argues that nurturing "apocalyptic imaginaries" of the world coming to an end is "an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism," for which a central leitmotif is the management of popular fear (Swyngedouw 2010, 219). These imaginaries tend to be wielded as means of disavowing social conflicts and antagonisms, effectively clearing the ground for invocations of Humanity as an agent of change while silencing the dissent of marginalized, disempowered groups. Swyngedouw contends that stoking populist sentiment in this manner "forecloses (or at least attempts to do so) politicization and evacuates dissent through the formation of a particular regime of environmental governance that revolves around consensus, agreement, participatory negotiation of different interests and technocratic expert management in the context of a non-disputed management of market-based socio-economic organization" (227). Thus, he underscores the need to turn "the climate question into a question of democracy and its meaning" (229)—not just a question of *whether* to engage in collective action, but of *how to do so, with whom*, through what organizational forms, with what modes of collective decision-making, and so on.

In light of growing acknowledgment that the only responses that seem workable involve collective action, Susan Sherwin has issued a call for a new kind of ethics: a "public ethics" (Sherwin 2008, 2012). Extending her earlier work on "relational autonomy," Sherwin attends to the many ways in which the activities of individuals, groups, and institutions are framed and constrained by the actions of agents at other "levels of human organization," reminding us how thoroughly intertwined are the actions of individuals and the organizations to which they belong.[2] Whereas her earlier work focused on how the autonomy of members of oppressed groups tends to be limited by the reasonable options made available in specific circumstances, she now appreciates that when it comes to climate change, "even those individuals with privilege and power are caught up in patterns of behaviour that are contrary to their deepest interests" (Sherwin 2012, 27). The problem is that many of us "lack the skills and infrastructure options necessary for making choices that give proper weight to the long-term consequences of the practices in which we collectively engage, and we find ourselves continually encouraged to focus on immediate gratification" (25).[3]

The background conditions structuring available options for energy and technology use, eating habits, and so on tend to make it reasonable—even pragmatically "rational"—to be complicit in practices that depend on excessive fossil-fuel consumption. Yet altering those conditions and reorienting the practices they support requires carefully considering which agents would need to do what and for whom. For example, where I live a person's ability to reduce her use of fossil fuels is constrained by the limited availability of reliable alternatives to driving a car. But the municipal government's ability to provide infrastructure for improved public transport is bound up with such factors as a lack of state-level funding, corporate and labor interests in the sale of locally built vehicles, and the absence of a critical mass of people willing to make use of buses and trains.

Sherwin worries that mainstream ethics offers little assistance in navigating situations of this sort. Indeed, she claims that "the moral theories and systems that we have developed in the West are simply not up to identifying and providing guidance with respect to the complex interconnections of responsibilities that must be assumed if we are to avoid impending catastrophes (or deal appropriately with many already present disasters)" (Sherwin 2012, 20). She identifies four features of leading approaches to ethics that render them poorly suited to addressing climate change. First, these approaches typically focus on assigning *one layer of duty to one type of agent at a time,* such as the duties of individuals toward one another. Yet what is needed is an approach "capable of discussing the interconnections of moral responsibilities for many different types of agents (that is, agents of many levels of human organization)" (21), for the actions of agents at one level tend to limit the reasonable options available to agents operating at the same and different levels. Second, the focus of ethics has been limited to *one level of human organization at a time*, such as state governments or corporations. Yet what is needed now is an ethics that attends to "multiple levels of human organization simultaneously" (21), for the actions of a number of agents need to be coordinated across levels. Third, ethics has sought *universally applicable, context invariant rules* that can be identified in the abstract. However, as a number of feminist ethicists have argued, "the scope of ethics should not be limited to a set of injunctions and norms that can be identified in the absence of any contextual details" (21). Finally, ethics has focused primarily on *matters of duty*, when it "should be concerned with the process and substance of determining how we will assign and assume the specific responsibilities associated with the various actual needs that arise within particular social units" (21). For instance, those occupying particularly vulnerable eco-social positions in relation to climate change ought to be heavily involved in sorting out whose needs are to be met and by whom, in recognition of the injustices and harms that have put them in the way of further harm (Cuomo 2011, 693–95).

Moving beyond the limitations of mainstream ethics, Sherwin envisions a public ethics capable of addressing the "distressingly complex array of coordination problems" associated with climate change (Sherwin 2012, 23). The primary task for such an ethics is to sort out the responsibilities properly assigned to each agent (that is, to agents at each level of human organization) *in relation to the others*. For "agents of many sorts

must take action, and the options available to each agent are likely to be determined by decisions at other levels" (24). Although Sherwin is proposing a way of circumnavigating the difficulties plaguing mainstream ethics, she is not articulating a substantive solution. By her estimates, elaborating a public ethics will require collaboration on the part of "an interdisciplinary, international collection of scholars, activists, practitioners, and communicators," drawing on "empirical as well as theoretical knowledge, including expertise in human behaviour, politics, economics, national and international law, religion, and the ability to stimulate moral imagination" (25). An easily overlooked feature of Sherwin's approach is that learning to work collaboratively at and across levels of human organization is necessary both to *sorting out* the responsibilities that urgently need to be assumed by many different types of agents, as well as to *enacting* the responsibilities thus assigned. After all, *no one* evinces the experience and skills required for devising and implementing response strategies that reflect the full battery of ethical, epistemic, and political concerns bound up with climate change.

In summary, Cuomo emphasizes that personal-sphere reductions are insufficient given the options currently available to most citizens of industrialized nations. Webb and others have identified currently circulating behavior-change technologies as ineffective, possibly even self-defeating means of transitioning to sustainable societies. Given that the individualization of responsibility is both insufficient and otherwise misguided, it is difficult to understand how ethically reflective persons living in high-emitting nations would not see the need to work collaboratively in devising and implementing coordinated response strategies. Nevertheless, the need to work collaboratively itself seems to present too great a challenge for many of us.

II. What Is Complacency?

Although those who are engaged on climate change tend to recognize complacency as a serious worry, we will not find much assistance from philosophers in understanding this concept: only two philosophy articles have been published on the topic, and one is quite narrow in its focus. In this section I review Nicholas Unwin's and Jason Kawall's respective accounts and argue that neither is adequate to the task of sorting out what it means to be complacent on climate change.

Unwin focuses on "moral complacency," which he claims is "normally defined as a general unwillingness to accept that one's moral opinions may be mistaken" (Unwin 1985, 205). Although refusals of criticism may "come about for a number of reasons," he is interested in one in particular: "because it is believed that there is nothing more to moral truth than moral opinion itself," given that "each culture has the right to determine its own obligations" (206). Because his main concern is to defend moral relativism against the charge that it leads to complacency, his argument to that effect need not detain us. According to Unwin, what makes complacency vicious is its rootedness in epistemic negligence, the remedy for which is straightforward: we simply need to remind ourselves that even radical forms of relativism do not entail the impossibility of error, nor do they entail that differently

situated others could not possibly know as much about our own local morality as we do.

Kawall offers a more sophisticated account, responding directly to Unwin. He observes that complacency "seems an especially common and troubling vice" that "works quietly, an often subtle drift into an easy self-satisfaction with one's efforts and accomplishments" (Kawall 2006, 343). According to Kawall, complacency is distinguished by *inappropriate* or *unjustified* feelings of self-satisfaction, and a person must be *excessively* satisfied with her level of performance or achievement to be complacent. Moreover, it is not mere ignorance or unjustified belief concerning one's performance that makes complacency vicious, but "beliefs formed in an epistemically irresponsible (culpable) manner" (348). He proposes the following definition:

> Complacency (with respect to some good or project G): is constituted by (i) an epistemically culpable overestimate of one's accomplishments or status that produces (ii) an excessive self-satisfaction that produces (iii) an insufficiently strong desire or felt need to maintain (or improve to) an appropriate level of accomplishment, that in turn produces (iv) a problematic lack of appropriately motivated, appropriate action or effort. (346)

Notice that to be charged with complacency in this sense there must be certain standards of "appropriateness" in ongoing action or effort about which a person could fail to responsibly form beliefs. How might these standards be established? Kawall offers the following:

> Often appropriate levels of action and effort will be largely established by a given practice (morality, professional basketball, etc.); there are certain levels of achievement that are expected of practitioners (though some accounting for an individual's particular talents, weaknesses, and so on, might be required). Beyond this, an individual's personal commitment to a given goal, practice, or project will typically be relevant. (348)

So he recommends appealing to whatever standards have been established by practices that have already been implemented, some of which are evident enough in his example of climate-related complacency:

> Consider an individual who, in reflecting on his impacts upon the environment, holds that "Well, sure I'm not perfect—I'm not some environmental saint. But I do alright; I'm basically a good environmental citizen." He then drives away in his SUV to his massive house with its three-car garage, etc. This individual… simply assumes that he is acting appropriately, and does not recognize a strong need to improve his behavior. (344)

The driver's motivational inertia must be rooted in irresponsibly formed beliefs, supposes Kawall. After all, how could he possibly believe that driving an SUV is

compatible with being a "good environmental citizen," when the "atrocious mileage and comparatively high level of emissions from these vehicles are quite well-known and this information is easily accessible" (352)? If he is committed to ongoing mitigation efforts, yet fails to acquire this bit of "common knowledge" and "cannot be bothered to investigate the matter" (352), he can hardly be let off the hook. As Kawall puts it, "Complacency, with its easy self-satisfaction and lack of effort constitutes a paradigmatic case of vicious negligence and inadequate concern for one's projects and achievements" (353, 344).

In summary, on Kawall's view individuals engage in practices against the background of established performance standards, and "succumb to" complacency when they irresponsibly understand themselves to have lived up to those standards. His account has at least three advantages: first, it distinguishes complacency from intellectual vices such as arrogance and dogmatism; second, it distinguishes complacency from other practical and moral vices such as indifference and resignation (349–53); and third, its practical upshot is simple: all we need to do to avoid "lapsing into" complacency is responsibly form beliefs concerning the demands of practices to which we are committed, and diligently monitor our own performance (the same goes for "overcoming" complacency).

These advantages notwithstanding, what Kawall fails to argue for is the presence of established performance standards in every instance of complacency. Consider the context of climate change: if even those with privilege and power are caught up in patterns of behavior that are contrary to their deepest interests, and if the only solutions that seem workable involve collective action, and sorting out those solutions will take a collaborative effort, then it must be conceded that suitable responsibilities have not yet been established for individuals, organizations, and institutions *in relation to one another*.[4] So if Kawall is right about the conditions under which agents can be complacent, then it seems we are forced to concede that government leaders, corporate executives, and citizens of industrialized nations with privilege and power are off the hook.

True, some standards have been established in efforts to expedite binding international agreements (for example, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol). Nevertheless, it is far from clear how responsibilities to be assumed at the level of national governments connect with those to be taken up by agents at other levels (corporations, churches, social groups, and so on), and many actors lack the skills and training required to see these complex interconnections. In any event, it should not be taken for granted that reducing directly controllable, personal-sphere emissions is the only or most important responsibility to be assumed by concerned citizens (Cuomo 2011, 708). More generally: it should not be taken for granted that what *any* agent at *any* level is expected to accomplish given established standards, and how well that agent is performing qua individual, ought to be the primary focus of attention. "There is a limit to what individuals can achieve qua individuals when dealing with well-entrenched practices," Sherwin reminds us. "The difficulty is that each type of actor must work collaboratively with others at the same and different levels of human organization if it is to develop sufficient scope to act effectively for positive change" (Sherwin 2012, 31).

Pace Kawall, Sherwin's argument suggests that agents at each level can justifiably hold themselves and others accountable for their motivational inertia even when it is not yet clear what they should be doing or what would count as "doing enough." Building on this line of thought, I want to suggest that an account of complacency adequate to the global threat of climate change should aspire to meet at least the following four requirements (the first follows directly from Sherwin's work, and the rest serve to highlight proposed improvements). First, an alternative account would need to make sense of failures to act that are not premised on access to clear standards of success. When the elaboration and fulfillment of certain responsibilities involves cooperation between and among agents at the same level, or coordinated action across several different levels, it may be especially difficult for any given agent to discern whether they are "doing the right thing" or have "done enough." Nevertheless, success in significantly reducing the harms of climate change will not be attainable should individuals, groups, and organizations each act on their own; so, presumably, motivational vice and practical uncertainty sometimes coincide. Second, an alternative account would help us understand how currently available performance standards are obscuring failures to act well with the very guidance they provide. Third, and relatedly, it would further understanding of what circumstances tend to make only two courses of action seem possible and attractive: either act alone on the basis of available standards, or adopt a "wait and see" posture, holding out for quick fixes (say, espousing faith in "technosalvation," or in God's promise to never again flood the Earth [Gifford 2011, 293]). Finally, an alternative account would need to suggest what processes of being "shaken out of" complacency look like, should they differ from processes implied by extant accounts.

III. Complacency Reconsidered

In this final section I offer a sketch for an alternative account of complacency. First, recall that in industrialized nations the performance standards currently in circulation provide insufficient guidance for adequate mitigation, and suitable responsibilities have not yet been established for individuals, organizations, and institutions *in relation to one another*. So if government leaders, corporate executives, and citizens of industrialized nations can justifiably be charged with "complacency on climate change," it will not be on the basis of received diagnoses. Because success in the relevant sense will not be attainable so long as agents of each type act on their own, complacency should not be understood as a vice belonging to agents considered in isolation, for which any particular agent is solely and wholly responsible for acquiring and correcting. Indeed, complacency would not work as well as it does were it manifested in agents' explicit beliefs that they have become "good environmental citizens," "corporations," and so on. For one thing, I take it that few living in industrialized nations genuinely believe this; and even if they did, few others would take them seriously. Unless, that is, those others had also been taught to expect there to be such a standard by friends, teachers, co-workers, environmentalists, and government agencies,

and had that expectation met so chronically by self-styled exemplars that forming it across practical domains had become an unself-conscious psychic habit—a habit so firmly sedimented that it would be difficult to bring it to attention, let alone remember how it had settled in.

This brings us to the second requirement: How might currently available standards obscure failures to act well with the very guidance they provide? When complacency is depicted as a vicious state of mind existing "inside" individuals, what may at first glance seem to be plausible remedies actually *foster and sustain complacency on climate change*. For example, consider an SUV driver who, upon suddenly "awakening" from his "vice of inattention" (Kawall 2006, 353), notices that all of his suburban neighbors have traded in for hybrids, sold their gigantic houses, and started planting rooftop gardens next to the solar panels they've installed on their condo buildings. He wonders how he could have allowed himself to be so blind for so long and decides he had better do the same. Then, while driving his new hybrid to the farmer's market to pick up some organic fruit, he marvels at the "sheer negligence" of people living in that inner-city neighborhood who let city officials place a toxic-waste incinerator near their homes. What makes this SUV driver complacent? *Contra* Unwin, it is not principally the disparaging opinions he smugly holds of others; and *contra* Kawall, it is not that he irresponsibly takes himself to be a "good environmental citizen." Notice that both authors depict adult humans as fully "rational," autonomous agents existing prior to or outside of interpersonal and institutional contexts characterized by unequal relations of power and influence. Having abstracted away from systemic issues of power and the modes of its organization and use in specific circumstances, each casts complacency as a vicious state of mind "inside" individuals, who are called upon to take responsibility for their epistemic negligence by opening themselves to moral criticism and paying closer attention to accessible standards of conduct. And that is just what our SUV driver does: he internalizes the standards established in his suburban neighborhood, judging these as credible guides to action on the basis of the experiences and core beliefs he has accumulated from the eco-social location he and his neighbors share. Although he may be held accountable for lacking critical self-awareness of his own location, I would resist the temptation to suppose that "he should have known better" on grounds of epistemic responsibility (cf. Code 2007, 226).

This line of thought should lead us to take seriously the possibility that regardless of how agents are feeling about themselves, and whether or not they have settled on certain moral opinions, they are complacent on climate change insofar as they are caught up in patterns of behavior that express *settled expectations of self-sufficiency*. That is, I "lapse into" complacency by coming to expect that there is something *I* can do to become a good environmental citizen by improving my own behavior and lifestyle, and when this expectation is so easily and frequently met by the people I interact with, and given the resources at my disposal, that it recedes into the background of my conscious awareness and becomes part of the way I expect the world to be. Sue Campbell argues that expectations acquire normative force in being met, and are the intrapsychic structures that give rise to norms, in some cases imposing

"obligations on others that must be coped with, even when the expectations are unreasonable or fix the world unsuccessfully" (Campbell 1999, 224). Settled expectations frame and limit perception "with an unquestioned normativity," determining what agents think they or others ought to do in ways that become visible only when frustrated, occasioning emotional responses that can be hostile or otherwise antithetical to change (231; 222–25). For example, I may feel *crushed* by the realization that shopping for organic fruit does more to allay my own guilty conscience and help me *feel* empowered than it does to further serious social and infrastructural transformation. So crushed, in fact, that when my friends suggest organizing around the health impacts of climate change in the city, I insist we focus instead on problems that are "closer to home" (Eliasoph 1998), constrained by stinging feelings of helplessness that depend on what I have come to expect "dealing with a problem" to look like in *this* world. Although I no longer *believe* I am epistemically and morally self-sufficient, I keep going on in the same way, expressing through my behavior settled expectations to the contrary.

Campbell's insights on the relationship between social identities, senses of self, and settled expectations strongly suggest that efforts to work through complacency must consider carefully what circumstances tend to foster expectations of self-sufficiency, enforce and sustain them once they have settled in, and resettle them when they are frustrated—in addition, of course, to what circumstances tend to support processes of *un*settling them. If instead we insist on understanding complacency as a vice for which individuals are solely and wholly responsible, we risk addressing the intrapsychic dimensions of social and infrastructural change in ways that reinforce complacency, while still not understanding why certain social identities tend to produce such curious cocktails of intense self-focus and relative lack of political self-awareness.

Under current conditions, settled expectations of self-sufficiency tend to make acting alone on the basis of established standards, or else sitting back and waiting for clear and definite solutions to emerge, seem like the only courses of action that are possible and attractive. So we need to ask: How can we support one another through what are often quite difficult processes of coming to grips with how tangled together all agents are in networks of highly interdependent relationships, not to mention how changeable those relations and relationally constituted agents can be?[5] For instance, developing understanding through public education may require moving away from overly simplistic, individualist models. As Harriet Bulkeley observes in her review of public policy literature on the problem of inaction, an "information deficit" model presents individuals as responding "rationally" to information on climate change, which leads to policy recommendations such as: "the public needs to be given more knowledge about environment issues in order to take action" (Bulkeley 2000, 316). However, on the basis of her research in Newcastle, Australia, Bulkeley underscores the "need to move from a narrow conception of public knowledge towards negotiation of the complex, fluid and contradictory nature of public understanding of global environmental issues" (329), which ought to be regarded as "located within the inter-subjective contexts of institutions and discourse," not "as stable, coherent, and consistent and to exist within individuals" (316).

Sociologist Kari Norgaard has developed a more sophisticated "social organization of denial" model, which helps shed light on how "the public on a collective level actively resists available information" (Norgaard 2011, 134). On this model, "What individuals choose to pay attention to or ignore may have psychological elements but must ultimately be understood within the context of both the shaping of interpersonal interaction through social norms and the broader political economic context" (134), which in her case study of Norway includes the extraction, export, and heavy consumption of oil. Norgaard focuses on accounting for what the information-deficit model cannot: the "behavior of the significant number of people who *do* know about global warming, believe it is happening, and express concern about it" (72), yet who still do not speak up or otherwise take action. Although I cannot do justice to her work here, of particular interest is her survey of studies suggesting that willingness to contribute to emissions reductions is inversely related to both emissions levels and wealth not only among nations (Sandvik 2008), but within the US (Zahran et al. 2006) as well as within US states (O'Connor et al. 2002), whereas "there are no examples of the reverse relationship" (Norgaard 2011, 77).

Norgaard's critical, power-sensitive approach to understanding denial resonates with my own approach to complacency. However, these two forms of motivational inertia are importantly distinct. People engaged in "socially organized denial" have some degree of knowledge about a complex problem, believe it is a problem now, even feel and express concern about it—yet they do not go on to address it. I see no problem with understanding this as a special form of "denial." Nevertheless, the people Norgaard has been interested in do not *commit themselves* to addressing the problem in question, nor do they undertake a (socially mediated) process of attending to the matter of what is to be done, and then either internalize accessible standards and work on living up to them; or, if no suitable standards are currently available, depend on a clear and definitive solution somehow emerging—expecting either way that *there is something to be done as an individual that is easily and universally knowable*.

What would being "shaken out of" complacency on climate change look like, and why should anybody bother? Those who are collaboratively beginning to shake one another out of this motivational vice are struggling to create alternatives to unsustainable societies, rebuilding what they have known without guarantees of success, and undergoing political transformations in the process of transforming the institutional contexts of their lives. They do not all come from the same backgrounds or share the same motivations. Informed by common failures, and rightly suspicious that waiting to see what happens is a dangerous way of rationalizing inaction, together they are proactively negotiating visions of sustainable community, food-production, education, work, and so on, while implementing strategies for unraveling the interconnected systems of domination holding unsustainable visions in place. Indeed, one of the chief reasons many of those who are already engaged on climate change are concerned about complacency is the specific role it plays in the domination of lands and of peoples. Norgaard reminds us that, "Citizens of wealthy nations who fail to respond to the issue of climate change benefit… in economic terms," while "avoiding the emotional and psychological entanglement and identity conflicts that may arise from

knowing that one is doing "the wrong thing"" (Norgaard 2011, 72). Yet even members of socially dominant groups are caught up in patterns of behavior that are contrary to their deepest interests. That it can be so difficult to unsettle expectations of self-sufficiency when the short-term benefits of going on in the same way are so tangible must be one of the forms of damage that domination inflicts on people and their lives—damage that I suspect goes uncompensated for by privileges enjoyed here and now. It is also one of the mechanisms through which domination is reproduced, to the extent that even those with privilege and power manage to prevent one another from participating in ongoing efforts to go on differently, stifling cultivation of the courage, humility, vigilance, and love we urgently need to avoid global catastrophe.

Notes

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1. My sketch for an account of complacency takes up Robin Dillon's call for more work on "critical character theory" (Dillon 2012). I agree with Dillon that at least some of the ills of domination and oppression, and the mechanisms through which they are perpetuated, can be understood in terms of certain structures or traits of character; and conversely, that liberatory struggle needs to engage the vices of individuals.

2. Sherwin invokes the term *level of human organization* to capture "any grouping that can demonstrate agency by taking on responsibilities," including "such categories as individual persons, family groups, governments of all levels, international bodies, corporations, churches, community groups, boards of education, health authorities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)" (Sherwin 2012, 22).

3. Sherwin reserves the term *autonomy* to capture the sorts of circumstances that make possible "actions that are consistent with a person's broader interests, values, and commitments, including the well-being of her group (based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and so on)" (Sherwin 2012, 19).

4. More precisely, we cannot get close to an exhaustive understanding of what each agent's responsibilities might include, and we need to figure out how to hold others accountable when they make it difficult for us to act as it seems we should.

5. Sue Campbell elaborates: "We develop and live our lives as persons within complex networks of institutional, personal, professional, interpersonal, and political relationships—both chosen and unchosen. We are shaped in and through our interactions with others in ways that are ongoing; and we develop cognitive and moral capacities and skills, including skills of moral reflection, in relational contexts that not only give these

capacities and skills specific content but also offer methods of evaluation and self-evaluation. We come to understand our lives through how others respond to us, and our relational histories are significant determiners of the tenor of our responses to others" (Campbell 2003, 156).

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