Climate Change, Moral Integrity, and Obligations to Reduce Individual Greenhouse Gas Emissions

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Introduction

Global Climate Change (GCC) may be the greatest environmental problem humanity has ever faced. If serious efforts are not made to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and properly adapt vulnerable populations to the warming world, the consequences will be utterly catastrophic. Rising sea levels will displace millions of people and cause some island nations, such as Tuvalu and Vanuatu, to disappear beneath the waters. Extreme weather events (such as hurricanes) will become more intense. Dry regions will become dryer, causing more droughts and lower crop yields. Millions of species will be unable to survive the radical changes in their surrounding ecosystems and go extinct. The list could go on.[1] GCC is already causing hundreds of thousands of human casualties annually (World Health Organization 2005, 2009; Global Humanitarian Forum 2009; DARA 2012), and unless massive adaptation measures are undertaken, these casualty counts will only rise as the effects of climate change become more pronounced. Given the enormity and duration of these effects, there is a well-founded consensus among environmental ethicists (following the lead of environmental scientists) that a substantial and immediate response to GCC is necessary to avoid its most dire possible outcomes.

Since the current climate crisis is global in nature, there is little doubt that any genuine solution will have to be achieved in the international political arena. Given that so many nations contribute to climate change and that its effects will be felt across the entire world, only cooperation and coordination on a global scale can provide an effective and morally satisfactory response to the problem. Nevertheless, there is a pressing moral question for individuals who emit GHGs: to what extent are they obligated to reduce these emissions? This question has proven rather divisive. Many have argued that individuals do not have an obligation to reduce their individual emissions (e.g., Johnson 2003; Sinnott-Armstrong 2005; Sandberg 2011).[2] Defenders of this view often base their arguments on one of the following claims (or some combination of them):

(1) *Non-Harm*: Individual GHG emissions cause a negligible amount of harm.

(2) *No Difference*: Reducing individual GHG emissions will not make a meaningful difference toward solving the problem.[3]

(3) *Demandingness*: An obligation to reduce individual GHG emissions is overly demanding.

Those who believe individuals do have obligations to reduce GHG emissions will often counter by rejecting each of these claims (or at least some of them).[4]

The Non-Harm claim, if it could be supported, provides the most direct route to grounding a moral duty to reduce individual emissions, which may explain why it is so central to some of the ongoing discussion of this issue.[5] Since virtually any moral theory will endorse a strong *prima facie* duty of non-harm, if individual emissions *do* cause a nontrivial amount of harm, then it is easy to see how obligations to reduce emissions will follow. Given the catastrophic harms that GCC will cause, the only emissions that could be justified would likely

be those tied in some way to our survival, although precisely what that entails remains a bit unclear. Certainly, the extent to which individual GHG emissions cause harm is important with respect to how individuals ought to respond to climate change, but preoccupation this principle can overshadow other approaches to individual obligations to reduce GHG emissions. My aim in this paper is to explore an alternative approach to grounding an obligation to reduce individual GHG emissions—one that bypasses the need to discuss the truth or falsity of Non-Harm. No Difference and Demandingness cannot be similarly bypassed, so they will be addressed along the way.

I argue in favor of a strong *prima facie* moral duty to reduce individual GHG emissions by appealing to the concept of integrity. This appeal to integrity bypasses the issue of whether an individual's emissions cause nontrivial harm to others. This paper's primary task is to present this argument, defend it from major objections, and then consider the role that an appeal to integrity could play as part of the larger response to climate change.

I begin by explaining how an appeal to integrity can provide a strong moral reason for individuals to reduce their individual GHG emissions, drawing in part on a recent integrity-based approach to the issue offered by Marion Hourdequin (2010). I then clarify how we should understand integrity in the context of this issue and develop an argument for reducing GHG emissions on the basis of maintaining this virtue. Afterward, I consider and rebut a series of objections to this line of reasoning. Finally, drawing on research conducted as part of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, I describe the value of this integrity-oriented argument to the current discussions of climate change occurring in the United States. Intriguingly, some empirical evidence suggests that an appeal to integrity that begins with the assumption of a duty to reduce individual emissions and tries to convince others to adopt a

political commitment to solving the problem may have greater significance in the realm of these discussions than an argument that starts with the assumption that this political commitment has already been adopted.

The Integrity Argument

Marion Hourdequin (2010) has recently argued that individuals with political commitments to work toward a collective solution to climate change should also reduce their individual GHG emissions because integrity "recommends congruence between one's actions and positions at the personal and political level" (p. 444). Her argument is an appropriate place to start assessing the plausibility of an appeal to integrity. Hourdequin begins with an assumption that Baylor Johnson (2003) and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) share: individuals have an obligation to work toward a political solution to climate change (even if they have no duty to reduce their own emissions).[6] From this starting point, Hourdequin claims that striving to possess integrity will lead an individual to reduce her individual GHG emissions because having integrity requires that an individual unify her commitments and act in accordance with them. Thus, Hourdquin (2010) reasons:

> A person who is truly concerned about climate change and is committed to alleviating it to the best of her ability must make some effort to effect social change… However, a person of integrity who has the commitment will act also on a personal level to reduce her own emissions and will, in general, avoid frivolous emissions of greenhouse gases: her actions at the political level will be integrated with those at the personal level (pp. 448–449).

Hourdequin considers integrity to be the antithesis of hypocrisy. Consider a political leader who is working to end to world hunger and poverty but never donates to charity, a southern plantation owner who advocates that slavery be abolished while simultaneously owning slaves, or an animal rights activist who is an unrelenting eater of factory-farmed meat. In each of these cases, the individuals' behavior does not exemplify the values they claim to hold, and in this manner the individuals showcase a lack of integrity. Just as the behavior of the individuals in these cases (and similar ones) is odd and morally problematic, "[I]t is odd and morally problematic for a climate change activist to be profligate and thoughtless about her GHG emissions" (Hourdequin 2010, p. 451).

At this juncture, we can see how this appeal to integrity, if successful, eludes an objection based on Non-Harm. Even if reductions in one's individual emissions do not reduce overall harm, integrity nonetheless requires this harmony between one's political objectives and personal life. Some exceptions are reasonable: Al Gore can permissibly tour the country to promote awareness of climate change even though doing so requires emitting GHGs. But this kind of case—where the emissions are part of an effort to help bring about a large-scale solution to climate change—is much different from ordinary cases of superfluous emissions. In this case, small emissions could lead to far greater long-term reduction in emissions; in ordinary cases where we joyride or travel, however, this kind of justification cannot be given.

Before examining this appeal to integrity more thoroughly, let's try to provide a more explicit presentation of the reasoning involved:

(1) Individuals have a *prima facie* obligation to work toward a collective political solution to climate change.

(2) Individuals ought to live with integrity.

(3) If individuals have a *prima facie* obligation to work toward a collective political solution to climate change and ought to live with integrity, then they also have a *prima facie* obligation to reduce their individual GHG emissions, unless they are already doing all that they can be reasonably be expected to do to reduce the impacts of climate change.

(4) Therefore, individuals have a *prima facie* obligation to reduce their individual GHG emissions, unless they are already doing all that they can be reasonably be expected to do to reduce the impacts of climate change. [1–3]

Call this line of reasoning the *Integrity Argument*. If this argument is correct, then those who promote political solutions to climate change lack integrity when they do not also reduce their own individual emissions. Now let's consider whether this argument is defensible.

The Integrity Argument begins with a starting point that seems rather secure. Given the significance and scope of the effects of climate change, a general obligation to cooperate in working toward a collective solution certainly seems required. (The fact that Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong, who both deny that we have a duty to reduce our individual emissions, nevertheless think this political duty is present says a great deal about this premise's plausibility.) At a minimum, those in democratic societies with the power to vote should strive to elect politicians who take climate change seriously and are genuinely committed to trying to enact a solution. I leave it open how much more this obligation requires, but the central point is that individuals should have a general commitment to facilitating a solution to climate change: finding means to undertake appropriate measures of mitigation, adaptation, and compensation is a political goal all individuals should endorse.[7]

Supporting (2) is not such a straightforward matter. Part of determining its plausibility is determining how to define integrity. Although integrity is a frequently cited virtue, a precise definition of it is elusive. There are a number of possible conceptions of integrity, and each of them has distinct advantages and disadvantages compared to its competitors (Scherkoske 2013). Moreover, integrity is sometimes used in a more general way to identify one's quality of being a morally good person; as Robert Audi and Patrick Murphy (2006) put the point, "In a great many cases, 'integrity' is a specific sounding term for something like moral soundness, whose exact character is left unspecified" (p. 8). On this definition, (2) translates to something like "individuals ought to live in morally sound ways." That may be true, but it would make the Integrity Argument viciously question-begging, since the argument would be assuming from the start that individual emission reductions are a part of "morally sound" behavior.

Fortunately, better definitions of integrity are available. Hourdequin (2010), drawing on Audi and Murphy (2006), highlights two central meanings of integrity: "integration" and "being integral" (p. 448). She states that being integral "involves the internalisation of certain commitments, such that these commitments are central to an individual's identity" (p. 448). Integration is related to being integral because it concerns how one unifies the various commitments she has so as to avoid conflicts among them. Integration is a special type of unity among the elements of character that minimizes conflicts among these elements so that "they form a coherent, ideally a harmonious, structure" (Audi and Murphy 2006, p. 9). If Hourdequin is right that these two concepts—*integration* and *being integral*—are vital parts of integrity, then it is fairly straightforward how we can derive support for (3). A person who has made a commitment to working toward a solution to climate change in the political sphere will, in order to satisfy *integration*, also manifest a commitment to combatting climate change in the personal

sphere. A failure to do so would suggest this person lacks the "kind of unity that integrity recommends" because her commitments would be embodied in only a single sphere of her existence rather than all the different spheres she inhabits (p. 449).

But this assessment might seem too quick. As Scherkoske's (2013) survey indicates, there are at least six distinct accounts of integrity as a moral virtue.[8] Given that controversy, one may worry why we should accept Hourdequin's approach to integrity over competing views. This concern is reasonable, but (3) can be supported by appealing solely to a few of integrity's most fundamental features—features that any plausible account of integrity will possess. Scherkoske (2013) identifies eight "data points" concerning integrity, which refer to the general ideas that the concept of integrity typically identifies (pp. 29–30):

- *Stickiness*: Integrity is tied importantly to sticking by one's values and convictions.

- *Integrity-Within-Reason*: A person of integrity must be responsive to reasons; integrity is not dogmatism.

- *Range*: Integrity is not limited in application to just moral convictions.

- *Truthfulness*: Integrity is centrally tied to traits such as honesty and sincerity.

- *Coherence*: A person of integrity must have her values and convictions properly cohere with her conduct.

- *Resoluteness*: People of integrity stand by their convictions both individually and socially and display a special kind of resolve.

- *Moral Sanity*: One cannot have integrity if one is grossly immoral.

- *Judgment*: We are keen to ensure that the people from whom we seek guidance or mentoring are people of integrity.

The ultimate account of integrity might feature all of these traits (provided that they could all be held simultaneously without inconsistency), but since it is controversial whether many of these data points are central to the concept of integrity, we will be better served by limiting ourselves to the most central elements of this virtue and making the argument work with only those features.

The core features of integrity are exemplified by Coherence, Stickiness, and Resoluteness. These elements are, in my view, essential to any plausible account of integrity. Coherence refers to the trait of ensuring a tight connection between one's beliefs and one's actions; it is the feature of integrity that explains why hypocrisy (which is simply the lack of this coherence) is such a fundamental violation of integrity. Stickiness and Resoluteness are related concepts, so much so that Scherkoske (2013) even describes Resoluteness as a type of "virtuous 'stickiness'" (p. 29). The main difference is that Stickiness refers to the willingness to stay mentally committed to one's principles while Resoluteness refers to the willingness to demonstrate commitment to those principles through one's actions. In this manner, Resoluteness can be seen as Stickiness that manifests properly in one's actions.[9]

The Integrity Argument can be sustained so long as the account of integrity that is endorsed satisfies Coherence, Stickiness, and Resoluteness. Of course, a complete account of integrity may involve more than accommodating *just* these three data points. It may be impossible for a thoroughgoing Nazi to possess integrity, no matter how well he satisfies Stickiness, Coherence, and Resoluteness.[10] To reiterate, however, I want to keep my account of integrity minimal so that the Integrity Argument is not taken to hinge on a convoluted and controversial conception of it. I maintain that Coherence, Stickiness and Resoluteness are necessary ingredients any plausible account of integrity and take no stand here on whether

anything further is required. Call this resulting conception of integrity CSR+. The "+"
acknowledges that a full account of integrity may include other important features.

If CSR+ is endorsed, then (3) becomes a fairly strong premise. Coherence captures the
notion that such a person should bring their conviction in the political sphere into alignment with
their behavior in the personal sphere. Stickiness and Resoluteness establish that this person
should hold firm to their convictions and resist temptations to compromise them, abandon them,
or fail to act on them.[11] Thus, if one seeks to maintain integrity, adopting a political commitment
to work toward a solution to climate change entails adopting a personal commitment to reduce
one's individual GHG emissions.

Of course, there is a qualifier attached to (3): individuals who are already doing
everything that they could reasonably be expected to do to reduce the impacts of GCC do not
have any obligation to reduce their GHG emissions further. Imagine an extreme activist who puts
all her energy into advocating political change regarding climate change policies and disregards
reducing her own individual emissions because doing so would reduce her ability to engage in
this activism. So far as I can tell, such a person could engage in this behavior and maintain her
integrity, so long as she remains so invested in her activism. The qualifier in (3) also accounts for
individuals whose GHG emissions are tied to their own survival: for such individuals, it is not
reasonable to demand that they make additional reductions to their emissions, and as long as they
value their own survival (or their family's survival), their continued emissions do not reveal a
lack of integrity. Even so, there are vastly many people who are not in any of these
circumstances, and it is to those individuals that the Integrity Argument applies.

Objections to the Integrity Argument

The reasoning behind the Integrity Argument may seem straightforward, but the argument faces a number of significant objections. Perhaps the first objection to come to mind concerns why one should live with integrity. This objection could take one of two forms, and each of them deserves a response. First, one might be skeptical about whether integrity is really a virtue at all. Perhaps the skeptic believes that integrity is often misidentified with other virtues and that this explains the disagreement about what precisely integrity is. Or perhaps the worry is that integrity is not actually valuable and so cannot be a virtue, since virtues are necessarily valuable. Second, one might think that having integrity is not (all-things-considered) worth cultivating because it appears that living with integrity is too demanding. This objector might think it morally praiseworthy to live with integrity but contend that doing so is supererogatory. Let's consider these objections in turn.

The first objection puts pressure on the claim that integrity is a virtue. I sympathize with the objector in thinking that integrity is a mysterious concept and that its careless use has been the cause of much philosophical confusion.[12] Nevertheless, there seems be a fairly significant consensus in the literature on at least one trait of integrity: it is a good thing (Scherkoske 2013).[13] It would, in other words, be a fatal flaw of an account of integrity if that account could not vindicate integrity's value in some way.

Part of the reason that integrity seems valuable is that it appears to capture our intuitive judgments about certain peculiar cases. Consider this example from Thomas Hill (1979):

> She [an old woman in Nazi Germany] lives on modest savings and offers no support to the Nazi regime either physically or morally. When the latest discriminatory laws against Jews are enforced, she is moved to protest. As a non-Jew she could have remained silent

and thereby avoided much subsequent harassment. She is regarded as a silly eccentric and so cannot expect to make an impact on others, much less to stop the Nazi machinery. She still feels she should speak up, but she wonders why (p. 84).[14]

Here, the woman is taking a stand against the Nazi regime even though it works against her self-interest and even though her protest is unlikely to contribute to solving the problem. These facts suggest that her behavior is simply irrational, but that analysis does not seem right. Individuals who take these kinds of symbolic stands against injustice appear praiseworthy, even when their protests work to their individual disadvantage and do not make a difference to solving the problem. How can this praiseworthiness be explained? One explanation is that these individuals exemplify integrity: they are unwilling to abandon their deeply held moral convictions even when it is disadvantageous for them not to do so.

Hourdequin (2010) identifies two further reasons for thinking integrity is valuable. First, integrity takes proper account of human psychology: it explains why it is undesirable and unrealistic to advocate (or even tolerate) serious discord among one's political and personal commitments. People will generally be happier if their objectives in the different spheres they inhabit are unified rather than in conflict because they will avoid the unpleasant cognitive dissonance that such discord creates.[15] Second, integrity is valuable because it communicates to others the seriousness with which people hold their particular commitments. In Hourdequin's (2010) words:

Interpersonally, integrity is a virtue from the perspective of intersubjective intelligibility and in affirming to others the authenticity of one's commitments. Where we see in others a lack of coherence between their political commitments and personal choices, we often wonder how to make sense of this apparent mismatch, and we may question the sincerity

with which certain commitments are held. A politician's environmental commitments, as embodied in public pronouncements and legislative support, for example, may be called into question if he or she lives a lavish and environmentally damaging lifestyle (p. 451). Thus, the value of integrity can (at least in part) be justified by an appeal to consequentialist considerations: if we want to enact serious political change, we must appropriately unify our commitments so that others will take them seriously. Otherwise, others will question whether we are really as committed to our cause as we claim. In our personal actions, we must manifest the social change that we want to see in the world.

Here, we see how a defender of the Integrity Argument can respond to an objection based on No Difference: even if individual reductions in emissions initially result in only a miniscule change in total amount of GHGs in the atmosphere, they indirectly facilitate effective political action. They help to model the social change that must ultimately develop if any long-term solution to climate change is to emerge. This observation proves to be pivotal because the force of the Integrity Argument depends in part on being able to adequately refute No Difference. If individual emissions reductions played no role in facilitating effective political action, then it would be difficult to explain how failing to reduce emissions would expose a lack of integrity. For example, a person who does not believe in God is presumably not violating her integrity when she does not pray for a solution to climate change: since she does not think such an action will contribute to solving the problem, there is no reason why her commitment to helping solve the problem would require her to act in this way.[16] Thus, it is vital that we recognize the important role that integrity can play in enacting large-scale social change.

Dale Jamieson (1992) seemed to recognize the social significance of integrity more than 20 years ago when he noted that approaching climate change from the perspective of calculating

probable outcomes had "made us cynical calculators and institutionalized hypocrisy" (p. 150).

Since we can all reason that our individual contributions to climate change are small and

(seemingly) negligible, the effects of climate change seem fated to occur regardless of what we

(individually) do, which means that we have no reason to change our individual behavior. If

everyone reasons this way, the large-scale social change required will not come to pass. Thus, if

this social change is to occur, "it is important that there be people of integrity and character who

act on the basis of principles and ideals" (pp. 150–151). This does not mean that the value of

integrity is reducible to its utility in solving the problem raised by climate change. Rather, the

point is that emphasizing integrity (and other relevant virtues) is particularly important in the

context of a collective action problem like climate change. When confronted with these kinds of

problems, even the staunchest utilitarians have reasons to take virtue seriously (Jamieson 2007).

In fact, my analysis of integrity thus far could be viewed as a defense of the claim that integrity

should be included in Jamieson's (2007) list of green virtues (pp. 181–182).

   Having argued that integrity is valuable, the second objection now looms. Integrity's

value might give us a reason to cultivate this virtue in ourselves, but there might be a

countervailing reason not to live with integrity: it may simply be too demanding. Consider the

earlier example of the woman who voices her criticism of the Nazis. This behavior may be

morally praiseworthy, and it may exemplify integrity. It does not follow from those facts alone

that acting with integrity is all-things-considered desirable. Living with integrity could, at least in

the context of how we impact the environment, be extraordinarily demanding since nearly

everyone in the developed world (and especially in the United States) has a substantial ecological

footprint. Moreover, radically reducing our ecological footprint may have negative effects not

only on us but also on our families, friends, and others who depend on us. If living with integrity

really demands so much of us, then perhaps it is not really something worth cultivating in ourselves. One could just bite the bullet and claim that integrity is, perhaps like many other virtues, a challenging character trait to develop and sustain. But such a response is unlikely to placate objectors, and the Integrity Argument can be given a better defense against Demandingness.

By way of an initial response, appeals to Demandingness are sometimes greatly exaggerated. Many so-called "sacrifices" of living in a more eco-friendly way are not really sacrifices at all; they are just lifestyle changes. Moreover, some of them will actually be to our advantage. Some will be a little uncomfortable in the summer if they set the air conditioner to 75 degrees instead of 72, but in a few weeks, they will adapt. Then this lifestyle change will actually be to their benefit because they will save money on utility expenses. Some authors have also argued that the values and lifestyles that our consumption supports do not actually make our lives significantly better (Andreou 2010; Gardiner 2012, pp. 244–245). The claim that a lifestyle change is "too demanding" may often serve as a mere rationalization for avoiding these minor lifestyle changes. Tying these thoughts together, the general point is that living in a more eco-friendly way need not be construed as a debilitating sacrifice. Like the bullet-biting reply, however, this point cannot suffice as a response by itself. What about *real* sacrifices? Might one be required to sell her car, sell her home and move to a place nearer where she works, or forego using electronics not powered by renewable forms of energy?

Integrity does not make such harsh demands on a person. Remember that one of the core features of integrity is Coherence—the unity of one's values and convictions. We are all likely to have a large number of values and convictions that conflict with our commitment to reducing our ecological footprint. We may value the welfare of our spouse or children and not want to subject

them to harsh lifestyle changes that would make their lives significantly worse. We might find great aesthetic value in film but recognize that we cannot easily view films without using electronic devices that are powered by fossil fuels. We may love our family members and value getting to see them over the holidays even though it requires us to fly across the country (an activity that emits a lot of GHGs). In these cases, we have conflicts between various values we hold, and we have to determine how to settle them. In all likelihood, different values will survive these conflicts in different contexts. We might even compromise between values, for instance, by deciding to only fly across the country twice a year instead of three or four times. It is obvious, however, that if we *always* choose not to reduce our GHG emissions, then we lack integrity: either we are rationalizing our unwillingness to change our ways, or we are not genuinely committed to reducing our GHG emissions.

One might wonder, however, why it is permissible for moral values to be trumped by values tied to film or travel, given the moral severity of climate change.[17] Certainly, responding to climate change will require some sacrifices, and given that enjoyments tied to film and travel are not essential for most people, they appear to be the kinds of things that ought to be sacrificed. At the heart of this objection is a broader issue in environmental ethics: the general extent to which consumers are obligated to reduce their environmentally damaging behaviors despite having structured their lives around many of these behaviors. How much sacrifice is required, and at what point do the sacrifices shift from being morally required to being supererogatory? With respect to reducing GHG emissions, the issue is especially muddled because it is possible to offset one's emissions—that is, to reduce emissions elsewhere in the world to counteract one's own individual emissions. John Broome (2012), for instance, argues that an individual's duty is

to reduce their net GHG emissions to zero, but he also claims that this can be done entirely through offsetting (pp. 85–95).

Specifying precisely how much people must reduce their emissions in order to maintain integrity is unlikely to have a determinate answer: it will be contingent upon many factors, such as their income, the adequacy (or inadequacy) of public transportation where they live, their professional commitments (e.g., whether their job requires travel), and even their personal dispositions. Given this context sensitivity and the complexity involving a person's competing commitments, I propose the following general principle: whatever a person of integrity is presently doing to reduce her emissions, she ought to strive to do a little bit more and in the process gradually push herself toward a higher level of sacrifice.[18] Some will reach a point at which they are no longer able to make further sacrifices without compromising their other values and commitments. (Achieving individual carbon neutrality through reducing and offsetting emissions might serve as an ideal final target, but the target will be unattainable for some.) But for those of us in in societies where so many of our activities cause GHG emissions, this process of gradually escalating our sacrifices may be a lifelong task. In any case, integrity requires only that this process of gradually increasing reductions in GHG emissions be earnestly undertaken: it does not require that one engage in environmental martyrdom or immediately transform the GHG-emitting behaviors that are tied to her other values and commitments.

On the view I have sketched, the Integrity Argument is very context-sensitive regarding how much one ought to reduce her GHG emissions. Nevertheless, the Integrity Argument entails that some GHG emissions are clearly impermissible—namely, those that are unnecessary and do not promote any significant value or conviction that we have. In such cases, there is no countervailing commitment that would justify a person's failure to reduce her emissions. For

nearly all of us living in the developed world, it is a safe bet that some of our emissions fit this description: they could be reduced with little or no reduction in our quality of life and do not promote any deeper or more meaningful commitment we have.

I have now defended the Integrity Argument from two objections that attempt to undercut the strength of the argument's conclusion, and the majority of section II was spent explicating the definition of integrity to support (3). Furthermore, given the devastating effects of climate change and the relatively low costs of voicing one's opinion about climate change in the political arena, we granted that (1) was a plausible starting point for the argument.[19] My defense of the Integrity Argument is now complete.

Climate Change Discussions and the Reverse Integrity Argument

If the reasoning in the prior sections is convincing, adopting a political commitment to work toward a solution to climate change entails a corresponding duty to reduce one's individual GHG emissions. However, since philosophical discussions often seem irrelevant to practical affairs, one may still wonder why this conclusion matters. In this section, I consider whether the Integrity Argument could have any meaningful import for climate change discussions that occur in the United States outside the realm of academic philosophy.[20]

First, the Integrity Argument, if presented properly, could help motivate individuals to live up to their values. A survey conducted as part of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication found that Americans frequently fail to act in accordance with their environmental values. To give an example pertinent to GHG emissions, 76% of survey respondents said that it was important to walk or bike to one's destination instead of driving, but only 15% of these respondents "always" or "often" engaged in these behaviors (Leiserowitz,

Maibach, and Roser-Renouf 2010). Similarly, 72% of respondents claimed that it was important

to carpool or use public transportation, but only 10% claimed that "often" or "always" did so

(Leiserowitz, Maibach, and Roser-Renouf 2010).[21] The survey is littered with other cases here

American's attitudes about green behaviors diverge considerably from their self-reported actions.

Appealing to integrity might give these individuals greater incentive to take their personal values

more seriously.

　　　Nevertheless, there is a considerable worry about the Integrity Argument that I have

sketched in earlier sections: for it to have any persuasive force, one must be committed to

working toward a collective, political solution toward climate change. It is not clear whether

many citizens in the United States have that commitment. Those researching climate change as

part of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication have grouped American citizens into

six different "Americas" based on their general attitudes toward climate change. Two of these

groups—the "Dismissive" and the "Doubtful"—generally think either that climate change is not

happening or that America is already doing enough in response to it. The "Disengaged" know

too little about GCC to have any strong commitments about it, and though the "Concerned" and

the "Cautious" think climate change might be a threat at the global level, neither group generally

thinks the threat requires an urgent response or takes personal action regarding it. Only the

"Alarmed" regard climate change as a serious, urgent threat and consistently strive to take

individual action in response to the problem (Maibach, Roser-Renouf, and Leiserowitz 2009). As

of 2012, the "Alarmed" appear to constitute only 16% of the population of the United States

(Leiserowitz et al. 2013). Moreover, even minimal actions of political advocacy among US

citizens are quite rare. In each of the past few years, only about 10% of US citizens

communicated with a politician via letter, email, or phone over the past year with respect to

climate change, and only about 75% of these politically active citizens urged their politicians to take action in response to climate change (Leiserowitz, Maibach, and Roser-Renouf 2010; Leiserowitz et al. 2011, 2012, 2013). This data suggests that only a small portion of US citizens really have a meaningful commitment to working toward an adequate political response to climate change.

However, some of this data suggest that a significant majority of US citizens do think it important that they incorporate certain environmentally friendly behaviors into their daily lives. Thus, for the majority of people, a different kind of integrity argument may prove more effective. Call this the *Reverse Integrity Argument*:

(R1) Individuals have a *prima facie* obligation to reduce their unnecessary GHG emissions.

(R2) Individuals ought to live with integrity.

(R3) If individuals have a *prima facie* obligation to reduce their unnecessary GHG emissions and ought to live with integrity, then they also have a general *prima facie* obligation to work toward a collective political solution to climate change.

(R4) Therefore, individuals have a general *prima facie* obligation to work toward a collective political solution to climate change. (R1–R3)

The Reverse Integrity Argument is not an exact reversal of the Integrity Argument, but the starting and ending points have been inverted. The argument now begins from a general obligation to reduce individual emissions and concludes with the obligation to work toward a political solution. (R1) is not the same conclusion as (4) from the Integrity Argument, but I suspect that it is a close approximation of the kind of moral commitment held by those in the United States who deliberately engage in these emissions-reducing behaviors.[22]

Based on prior arguments, it is not hard to illustrate how the support for the Reverse Integrity Argument will proceed. The support for (R2) will be identical to the support for (2), since those premises are the same. The key to supporting (R3) lies in the fact that integrity generally requires a unity between our personal and political commitments. Hence, it does not matter whether we begin with a personal commitment to reduce our GHG emissions or a political commitment to work toward a large-scale solution to climate change: in each case, maintaining integrity will usually require us to adopt both commitments and act in accordance with them. But if the aim in the context of public discussion of climate change is to encourage citizens to engage in political action, the Reverse Integrity Argument is the one that has the greater chance of persuading them. Moreover, political action is more vital to developing a viable long-term response to climate change, and so promoting political action should take priority over promoting individual emissions-reducing behaviors. Environmental philosophers might think it uncontroversial that anyone should be willing to engage in minimal political actions regarding climate change (e.g., voting for politicians who take climate change seriously), but clearly the American public is more convinced that they should adopt greener lifestyles than take political action. Perhaps appealing to their integrity can help rouse them from their political apathy.

At this juncture, however, we should consider an objection that might be raised about not only the Reverse Integrity Argument but also the Integrity Argument. What if a political action does not contribute to developing a solution to climate change?[23] Sticking with our sample case of the United States, consider that the national political system is beholden to large financial donors who are invested in maintaining a carbon-based economy and that this system also structurally prohibits genuine third-party alternatives. Under these circumstances, one may fear

that voting for politicians who are serious about responding to climate change nevertheless does little to aid the development of a collective solution to the problem. But if political efficacy cannot be enhanced at all by individual action, then both these integrity-based arguments are threatened. In the Integrity Argument, guaranteed ineffectiveness in the political arena would undermine the presence of a duty to work toward a collective solution to climate change, effectively refuting (1). Since it would be impossible to achieve a collective solution to climate change, one would have little reason to pursue the attainment of this solution. In the Reverse Integrity Argument, one would have strong grounds for rejecting (R3) because the political commitment would in no way contribute to reducing overall GHG emissions. Thus, one's commitment to reducing her individual emissions would not entail a further duty to adopt the corresponding political commitment. Here we see that the Reverse Integrity Argument, like the Integrity Argument, must refute No Difference to be successful. If the background assumption that our actions can be politically efficacious is undermined, then our actions really do not make any difference, and the Reverse Integrity Argument fails.

There are two responses to this objection. The first, which we might call the optimistic response, is to deny that political action is doomed to be insignificant or ineffective. Just as there are corporate interests invested in perpetuating reliance on fossil fuels, there are corporate interests tied to alternative energy. The economic picture is not exclusively a one-way street. We can also observe some recent instances where political action, even in the United States, seems to have made a difference in combatting climate change. Political activism from environmentalists in opposition to the Keystone XL Pipeline, for instance, played a pivotal role in President Obama denying its construction (Davenport 2015). Globally, the fossil fuel divestment movement, a movement devoted to promoting the removal of financial investments from companies involved

in the extraction of fossil fuels, continues to gain momentum and advocate a cultural shift away from fossil fuels. At the time of writing, Fossil Free reports over 500 institutions, including more nearly 40 colleges and universities, divesting a total of approximately $3.4 trillion (http://gofossilfree.org/commitments/).[24] The political picture is not yet bleak enough to give up hope in the effectiveness of political action.

Additionally, even if one remains worried about the effectiveness of political action, I argue that such a defeatist perspective ought to be avoided. Adopting an attitude of resignation with respect to political action toward climate change only makes it more likely that climate change will remain unsolved until it is too late to escape its gravest effects. If belief in political ineffectiveness becomes widespread, it may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy by inhibiting the social change that is a necessary catalyst for a lasting solution to climate change. Thus, given the severity of climate change, we *must* resist adopting this outlook: we should not promote this attitude in ourselves or others and must act *as if* political action (of some sort) can make a difference, even if our doubts persist. If we act to the contrary, then we are only increasing the chances that our worries will be realized and that our efforts at avoiding a global climate catastrophe will fail.[25]

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that an appeal to integrity provides strong moral reasons for individuals who are committed to cooperating in a political response to climate change to also adopt a related commitment to reduce their individual GHG emissions. In supporting this position, I have defended the Integrity Argument from several objections, including concerns that integrity is not valuable and that maintaining integrity is too demanding. While these

arguments might be of prime interest to environmental philosophers, those engaged in public

outreach with respect to climate change are likely to get more leverage out of the Reverse

Integrity Argument, which appeals to integrity to ground an obligation to help achieve a feasible,

political response to climate change. This argument uses citizens' commitments to living in

environmentally friendly ways to galvanize them to take certain forms of political action. Of

course, even if political action is more vital to developing a solution to climate change, it should

be clear that maintaining integrity also requires some individual emission reductions. For the

environmentally virtuous person, integrity requires that we act in accordance with our

environmental values in both the personal and political spheres.[26]

Notes

[1] The most comprehensive accounts of the effects of GCC are the reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). For the most recent report on the impacts of GCC, see IPCC (2014).

[2] Johnson later retracted this claim. See Johnson (2011).

[3] Non-Harm and No-Difference are meaningfully different claims: it is possible to endorse Non-Harm without endorsing No-Difference and vice-versa. Suppose one rejects Non-Harm – she believes that her GHG emissions *do* cause harm. She might still believe that she lacks a duty to reduce her individual GHG emissions because she does not think her individual emissions reductions will help solve the problem. (Perhaps she thinks, following Hale (2011), that all fossil fuels will inevitably be burned regardless of her individual choices.) She rejects Non-Harm but still denies an obligation to reduce her GHG emissions because she upholds No Difference.

In contrast, suppose one rejects No Difference – she believes that her individual GHG emissions reductions *could* make a difference in solving the problem of climate change. She might still believe that she is under no obligation to reduce her GHG emissions. She could believe that her emissions do not cause harm and that reducing them is therefore supererogatory. She rejects No Difference but still denies an obligation to reduce her GHG emissions because she upholds Non-Harm.

[4] To give some recent examples, John Broome (2012) and John Nolt (2011) both argue that individual lifetime emissions cause substantial harm. Nolt (2013) also argues in a follow-up article that emissions reductions by individuals could make a significant difference in lowering U.S. national emissions if certain minimally demanding, emissions-reducing behaviors were adopted. Anne Schwenkenbecher (2014) provides a detailed critique of all three claims.

[5] In fact, the centrality of Non-Harm to these discussions has resulted in entire articles devoted just to determining how we should understand the harm of climate change (e.g., Hartzell-Nichols 2012).

[6] Sandberg (2011) is not as explicit about whether he believes we also have this duty, but he views his project as an expansion and defense of Sinnott-Armstrong's position and at times stresses the need for a response to climate change to focus on lines of action that are more likely to make a difference to solving the problem than reducing individual emissions (p. 247). Thus, it seems reasonable to assume he also endorses the claim that individuals have this general political obligation.

[7] Compensation is discussed far less frequently than mitigation and adaptation, but it is clear that there will be populations (particularly in the developing world) who are unjustly harmed by climate change and that they deserve to be compensated for these harms.

[8] There is also an error-theoretic account that suggests integrity is not a virtue at all and an account of integrity as an *epistemic* virtue. The dominant view is that integrity is a moral virtue, which implies that most analyses of integrity assume both the error-theoretic and epistemic accounts of integrity are false. My own account of integrity will bypass issues about what particular account of integrity is correct, but my later remarks about integrity's value can be interpreted as an argument against the error-theoretic account.

[9] As this phrasing suggests, it is possible to read Resoluteness in a robust way that encompasses Stickiness, but the convention in the literature has been to separate these traits.

[10] It is worth noting that Moral Sanity, even if required, would not threaten the Integrity Argument because working toward a solution to climate change is a morally worthy cause. Moreover, even those who think individuals are not obligated to reduce their individual GHG emissions believe that such reductions are morally permissible (except in odd cases where doing so brings significant harm to others).

[11] This is particularly important with respect to GHG emissions because most developed countries (especially the consumerist United States) present many temptations for frivolously increasing one's individual emissions, sometimes without even receiving any meaningful benefit from doing so.

[12] The relative scarcity of explicit discussion of integrity in classic virtue ethics literature also contributes to this problem, as noted by Audi and Murphy (2006, pp. 3–4).

[13] This is especially true in the literature on business ethics. See Audi and Murphy (2006, pp. 7–8).

[14] Hill (1979) examines acts of symbolic protest from a more deontological perspective; my borrowing of his case does not mean that I read him as endorsing my integrity-based analysis.

[15] Cognitive discipline is a well-established psychological phenomenon in which the recognition of inconsistent beliefs or attitudes creates a feeling of discomfort. Typically, this discomfort motivates individuals to resolve the inconsistency. For the classic psychological studies on cognitive dissonance, see Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) and Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1964).

[16] In the earlier example of the Nazi protestor, it is specified that the woman's protests will not make a difference to stopping the Nazi regime. A reviewer notes that a positive appraisal of the woman's actions is difficult to explain

when the Integrity Argument in part depends on refuting No Difference. My appraisal of the woman's actions is that they are supererogatory: it is morally praiseworthy for the protestor to voice opposition to these immoral activities, but if it is genuinely impossible for her actions to contribute to solving the problem, then she cannot have a moral obligation to engage in these protests. Remember that this example was only meant to provide an explanation of why we should accept the claim that integrity is valuable; the behavior in this case is not claimed to be morally obligatory. However, the Integrity Argument *is* trying to establish that something is morally obligatory, and that is why No Difference must be addressed. If the argument only aimed at establishing that reducing GHG emissions were a morally good thing to do, then it might not be necessary to refute No Difference: symbolic stands like those of the Nazi protestor seem to have a unique kind of moral value. But I am not sure that this aspect of integrity's value can ground a moral obligation to perform actions that do nothing to stop the moral wrongs that are being done.

The reviewer also suggests that an obligation to reduce GHG emissions could arise—even if No Difference were not refuted—from a duty to refrain from contributing to the harm of climate change. In fact, this strategy has recently been pursued by Travis Rieder (2016), who grounds some of our moral obligations to reduce our individual carbon footprints in a duty not to contribute to massive, systematic harms (pp. 26−29). However, since this paper deliberately tries to bypass issues surrounding the harm caused by individual GHG emissions, this line of argument must be pursued and critiqued elsewhere.

[17] I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this concern.

[18] This position is similar in spirit to Ty Raterman's (2012) view on the extent to which individuals are obligated to live in environmentally sustainable ways.

[19] A stubborn objector might argue that they can maintain integrity without reducing emissions simply by staying ignorant about climate change. While that might serve as a means to avoid the collective political commitment, it comes at a high cost: one maintains integrity by cultivating intellectual vices. Exercising moral virtues requires being informed (Kawall 2010; Jenni 2003), and while it is well beyond human capacities to be fully informed about every morally significant event currently occurring, we at least ought to investigate the matters that are most salient and in which we are personally implicated, particularly when the information about these issues is prevalent and can be accessed at low costs to us (Kawall 2010, pp. 111−116). Climate change fits that description; thus, it demands rigorous and dutiful examination. Upon completing that examination in an impartial and objective manner, it should be clear that we have compelling moral reasons to cooperate to work toward a collective, political solution to climate change.

[20] I focus on the United States because citizens in the United States are thoroughly divided with regard to their attitudes about global climate change and because the United States' policies on climate change and willingness to collaborate with other nations will play an enormous role in the success or failure of an attempted global response to climate change. This does not mean, however, that the Integrity Argument cannot be significant in climate change discussions taking place in other nations.

[21] Those who typically bike or walk to their destinations are unlikely to carpool or use public transportation frequently, so these figures may not be quite as bad as they seem.

[22] I doubt that they would speak in the language of *prima facie* obligations, but I think they would agree that engaging in emissions-reducing behaviors is something that individuals should generally do.

[23] I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this objection to my attention.

[24] Earlier in the paper, I mentioned that I would not specify in great detail precisely what—beyond responsible voting—the political obligation requires. However, for those worried that voting may be ineffective, involvement in organizations such as Fossil Free or promotion of the initiatives that they advocate may provide an alternate means of adopting the relevant political commitment.

[25] McKinnon (2014) offers a related but different argument for why we should not regard our individuals actions as making no difference in with respect to climate change.

[26] Acknowledgements removed for blind review.

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