

**INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE ETHICS OF HOPING FOR A MORE
JUST CLIMATE FUTURE**

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ABSTRACT

Many have begun to despair that climate justice will prevail even in a minimal form. The affective dimensions of such despair, we suggest, threaten to make climate action appear too demanding. Thus, despair constitutes a moral challenge to individual climate action that has not yet received adequate attention. In response, we defend a duty to act in hope for a more just (climate) future. However, as we see it, this duty falls differentially upon the shoulders of more and less advantaged agents in society. From arguments by Black thinkers like Derrick Bell, we draw a set of distinctions between two types of hope: one for ideal justice, and one for more modest change; and between two types of hopeful actions, those undertaken through formal political channels and those we call ‘extra-political’ actions; and between two sites of differential moral burdens, those of the privileged and those of the oppressed. Ours’ is a case

for facing even bleak realities, demanding otherwise, and acting in hope to achieve a better future.

KEYWORDS

Hope, racism, James Baldwin, climate change, despair, justice, activism, individual responsibility

INTRODUCTION

In recent climate negotiations, a temperature rise of 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial averages constitutes ‘dangerous interference with the climate system’ – or dangerous climate change.¹ In October 2018, the International Panel of Climate Change released a special report assessing the prospect of remaining within the (relative) safety of 1.5 degree temperature rise. The authors concluded that we would pass this threshold unless ‘rapid and far-reaching’ changes to energy infrastructure were undertaken.² Worse yet, even stabilising at 1.5 degrees still engenders substantial risk. Facing this dire outlook, an understandable reaction would be despair: to abandon hope, to resign oneself to the stricken belief that climate justice in even a minimal form will not occur.³

Our primary purpose in this article is to confront a specific type of person who cares deeply about climate future and chooses not to act due to philosophical despair.⁴ Living in the shadow of climate injustice and environmental destruction, there is a temptation simply not to think about it. Recently, we have noticed this seduction in ourselves and others. To offer just one example, one of us recently gave a talk on individual climate responsibility. After this talk, an attendee came up and remarked, ‘I don’t worry about my personal emissions because thinking about them is just too depressing’. Crucially, this person did not deny that their emissions might be harmful. Rather, they presented a challenge that we call

‘demandingness from despair’ (DfD). Put precisely, DfD has three logical steps. First, it holds that there is a substantial psychological burden associated with thinking about climate change in a context where climate injustice is ongoing and seemingly inevitable. Second, it asserts that taking on this psychological burden is too demanding. Finally, it concludes that all climate action involving such a burden is too demanding to be morally required.

While it is often recognised that demandingness constrains climate duties to some degree, we worry that DfD threatens near-total obfuscation of individual climate responsibility. For one, DfD might excuse *all* individual climate obligations to reduce one’s contribution to climate change, including particularly easy and even cost-effective responsibilities such as recycling, reusing a single water bottle, shopping with canvas bags, turning off electronics and avoiding frivolous driving and flying (the ‘low-hanging fruit’). More than this, however, DfD threatens to undermine obligations to engage in collective action that many sceptics of individual responsibility defend. Thus, despair constitutes a moral challenge to action that has not yet been given sufficient attention.

In what follows, first we discuss general demandingness objections and how climate despair may drastically mitigate the extent of individual responsibility to act on the climate. Then, we argue against the idea that climate despair provides such a moral mitigation, and for the duty to act in hope for a more just climate future – even if the optimal outcomes are no longer possible. As we see it, however, this duty falls differentially upon the shoulders of more and less advantaged agents in society, recommending differential forms of hope and of action. To show this, we consider hope for justice and despair at institutional inaction more generally, focusing specifically on the case of racial injustice from which we take lessons for climate ethics. From arguments by Black thinkers like Derrick Bell, we draw a set of distinctions between two types of hope: one for ideal justice, and one for more modest change; and between two types of hopeful actions, those undertaken through formal political

channels and a contrastive category we call ‘extra-political’ actions; and between two sites of differential moral burdens, those of the privileged and those of the oppressed. With these distinctions sketched, we argue that the moral and practical reasons to hope become decisive.

CLIMATE RESPONSIBILITY AND DEMANDINGNESS

Many people have the intuition that demandingness mitigates moral obligations. A popular way of formalising this thought is associated with Bernard Williams, who understood demandingness mitigation in terms of personal integrity. The moral demand to discard one’s values for the general good alienates an individual ‘in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions’.⁵ The idea is that the moral agent is an embodied being with projects and attitudes with which they are most closely identified. To transform them merely into a welfare-maximisation machine is to compromise the moral agent themselves. For the purposes of this article, we do not robustly defend such an account, but we *do* assume that demandingness constitutes real moral constraints.

Climate ethicists also tend to take demandingness constraints very seriously; there is a wide consensus that obligations to reduce one’s individual contribution to climate change depend heavily on the cost of doing so.⁶ Because greenhouse gas emissions are engrained in the energy infrastructure, climate change threatens to moralise any choice that involves energy use: from the food one consumes and the length of one’s showers, to marathoning a Netflix show or even the decision to have a child. If left unqualified, then, a duty to eliminate personal emissions would be overwhelming. Accordingly, philosophers have established significant constraints on such a duty. Still, most climate ethicists have argued that *some* individual obligations survive, often involving ‘low-hanging fruit’ *because* they can be put into practice at so little personal cost.⁷

Recognising the affective dimensions of climate despair, however, problematises this view. Climate despair is frequently accompanied by pain. Presenting their recent study of climate anxiety, Hickman et al. write that climate distress ‘is associated with young people perceiving that they have no future, that humanity is doomed, that governments are failing to respond adequately, and with feelings of betrayal and abandonment by governments and adults’.⁸ Around the globe, such ‘chronic stressors ... will have significant, long-lasting and incremental negative implications on the mental health of children and young people’.⁹ While this study focuses on the psychological burden of climate change on young people, one would expect that these despairing feelings extend to many of all ages. In 2017, the American Psychological Association published a report that summarised the recent literature on the psychological impacts of climate change.¹⁰ While the report stresses that such effects are complicated and diverse, the authors make clear that the mental health impacts can be both acute (including increase in trauma and shock, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression) as well as chronic (increased sense of helplessness, hopelessness, fatalism and feelings of loss).¹¹ Hence, DfD’s first premise is justified: there may be substantial psychological burdens associated with thinking about climate change in a context where climate injustice is ongoing and seemingly inevitable.

How does despair relate to demandingness? Insofar as despair often involves suffering, the pain of dwelling on climate change may obstruct one from pursuing one’s life projects. A despairing individual might find it more difficult to function when considering the object of their despair. After all, despair distinguishes from mere disbelief in that despair is infused with affect: to despair is to disbelieve in the possibility of what one (deeply) desires. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, for individuals to regard the objects of their despair impassively. But this truism undermines the view in the literature that demandingness only excuses individual emissions up to a point.¹² In this popular view, demandingness

concerns might permit flying across the country to attend a family member's funeral but cannot excuse frivolous driving in a 'gas guzzler' because such actions are easily abandoned. However, DfD claims that seemingly effortless strategies of reducing emissions may sometimes *become* quite demanding if one factors in climate despair. The expectation that one regularly adjust one's lifestyle to climate change, even in individually small ways, may significantly burden the despairing individual who finds comfort in forgetting the unfolding environmental crisis. Now, rather than trying their best to forget, they must morally do their part to figure out the best way that they can help achieve a more just climate future. In itself, that is a substantial moral demand. Hence, the second premise follows: the psychological burden of contemplating the climate crisis is too demanding to be morally required.

DfD in some ways fits quite neatly into the broader camp of demandingness objections by asserting that taking on individual emission reductions is too burdensome to be morally obligatory. Yet, in targeting the regular contemplation of climate change as morally overdemanding, DfD might totally excuse individual climate obligations as it is hard to think of a climate action that does not require regularly contemplating climate change. This includes the 'low-hanging fruit', but also individual actions that are often considered especially efficacious: such as signing petitions, letter-writing, protesting, community organising or engaging in most other forms of collective climate action.¹³ At minimum, DfD presents a substantial obstacle to moral motivation; more strongly, however, DfD may constitute a serious normative challenge to individual climate responsibility in a context when it seems direly needed at scale.

THE MORAL OBLIGATION TO ACT IN HOPE

There are at least two ways of responding to a demandingness objection without dismissing the category of demandingness mitigation altogether.¹⁴ First, one might question the demandingness itself by showing how one can reasonably achieve one's life projects while meeting the relevant demands of morality. Second, one may contend that one's life projects themselves, or the way of life required to achieve them, are morally impermissible, and so morality need not allow their pursuit. To respond in the first way would be to empirically question whether climate despair renders fulfilling one's individual climate obligations at odds with the pursuit of one's life projects. To respond to demandingness from despair in the second way would be to show that seeking to live a life insensitive to the ongoing climate crisis is itself morally wrong. In what follows, we opt for the second strategy. The motivation behind this choice is that our training as philosophers does not best equip us for raising doubts contingent on contentious psychological facts of the matter. Therefore, we seek to establish that living a life in climate despair is morally wrong under typical circumstances. Therefore, obligations to alter or abandon such a life cannot be dismissed as too demanding. To this task we now turn.

The social dimensions of hope and despair

Hope is a complicated concept. In both everyday speech and academic scholarship, it is standard to contrast hope with despair.¹⁵ As previously alluded to, an intuitive conception is that hope is to believe that an outcome is possible but not certain, and to desire that the relevant outcome occurs. Despair, then, can be understood negatively as a lack of belief in the possibility of a desired outcome. While there is disagreement within the literature about how to positively understand these two cognitive states, there is a consensus that to hope is more than simply desiring an outcome one deems possible.¹⁶

Specifically, Phillip Pettit argues that the belief–desire model seems to miss a crucial motivational dimension of hope. As a way of illustrating his idea, let’s imagine a person, Maggie, who believes that a more just climate future is possible and desires this future but does nothing to try to make it a reality. On the belief–desire model, Maggie seemingly would still be hoping for a more just climate future. After all, Maggie grants that a more just future is possible and may strongly desire it. Still, according to Pettit, Maggie seems to despair because is not motivated to act to realise that future. Similar cases inspired Pettit to distinguish between superficial belief–desire hope and substantial hope. In the latter, hope consists of acting as if the desired outcome might really obtain.¹⁷ In this way, Maggie despairs in Pettit’s substantial sense because she does not act as she ought to if she believed that a more just climate future were possible and that her influence could play an important part in that result coming about.

Now, Pettit’s complete account of hope is controversial.¹⁸ Even so, we think conceptualising hope in this way helps reveal an important positive conception of despair: one despairs when one acts as if a more just future were impossible. This idea helps clarify the connection between despair and complacency. Jayne Waterworth notes that ‘a significant feature of despair is its intrinsic tendency to interpret present or envisage future circumstances as fixed and immutable’.¹⁹ If so, it is easy to see how despair undermines agency and curbs action. If one believes injustice to be fixed and immutable, then accepting injustice is not only morally permissible but the only rational thing to do. This form of despair precludes acting in hope, defined as follows: to act in hope is to act as one ought if the object of one’s hope were possible, even if one doubts such a future will come to pass.

In this article we do not argue that individuals have an obligation to hope, but rather that they have an obligation to *act* in hope. Acting in hope is a refutation of despair’s passivity. Rebecca Solnit puts the point powerfully:

I believe in hope as an act of defiance, or rather as the foundation of an ongoing series of acts of defiance, those acts necessary to bring about some of what we hope for while we live by principle in the meantime. There is no alternative, except surrender. And surrender not only abandons the future, it abandons the soul.²⁰

But what does acting in hope look like? Inevitably, the answer will depend on the object of hope. However, when justice itself is on the line, so long as greater justice is possible, acting in hope morally requires the individual to seek to create the conditions necessary for a more just future to come about; to serve, as Pettit puts it, a ‘galvanizing role’.²¹ Someone who hopes well embraces uncertainty: they understand the instability of power structures throughout history and the unpredictability of transformational change. According to Rebecca Solnit, this is why amnesia leads to despair: ‘when you don’t know how much things have changed, you don’t see that they are changing or that they can change’.²² To hope, then, is to ‘embrace the essential unknowability of the world’.²³ To recognise the possibility of a more just climate future is to exercise epistemic humility, to understand that one does not know the future, and this recognition brings hope.

A few things, however, are certain. Climate justice in ideal form, if it was ever possible, is possible no more. There has been a staggering rise in climate emergencies since 2000, killing 1.23 million people and affecting 4 billion in total.²⁴ And this devastation has not been shared equally: poorer nations have experienced death rates more than four times higher than richer nations.²⁵ Ideal climate justice is impossible because climate injustice is ongoing and can never be fully forgiven or repaired. But justice *simpliciter* is rarely the proper object of hope. We do not dispute that ideal justice is worth theorising; such inquiry may be intrinsically valuable, and ideals can guide and motivate action. Yet, like the perfect

circle, ideal justice likely does not exist in the real world and might be impossible to recognise even if it did. The utopian hope that humanity might achieve the moral ideal can rightly be dismissed as naive, but this does not preclude the possibility and importance of more modest hope.²⁶

That things can always be worse is at once a grim and extremely hopeful thought. The problem with rhetoric such as that which suggests we have ‘twelve years to limit climate change catastrophe’ is that dangerous climate change can always be limited through carbon reductions and adaptation.²⁷ For this reason, it is always worth fighting for a more just climate future. Such a future may be warmer, but less so than it may have been. Moreover, there is still ample opportunity for the most vulnerable communities to acquire the self-determination to adapt to the changing climate effectively. Yet this all comes with the corollary that things can be worse, and this should spur action; it should remind the individual that waiting around for a better world is a risky enterprise at best. As we will argue, when the social stakes are as high as they are in the case of climate change, acting in pursuit of justice is morally required even among the despairing. To act in hope for a more just climate future is to seek to create the conditions necessary for the more just climate future to come about.

This obligation stems primarily from our duties as citizens. Darrel Moellendorf argues that hope is politically important in two ways.²⁸ Firstly, because a moral society is rarely given freely; pursuing more just institutions requires a willingness to seek them out even if circumstances are greatly uncertain and dangerous and in general antagonistic to their creation.²⁹ Insofar as despair stymies one’s ability to fight for justice, the individual should refuse to act in accordance with it. Secondly, ‘persons who lack confidence in their ability and willingness to realize what they take to be important will have little reason to demand such institutions’.³⁰ Not only does hope enable one to fight for justice oneself, but hope is

needed to demand justice in the first place. If I despair that millions of people will die from starvation next year, I will not think to demand otherwise. In this sense, despair on the part of the citizenry all but ensures injustice continues.

The point we raise here follows one oft-cited in the climate ethics literature. There is much philosophical debate about whether individuals have a moral obligation to reduce their private contribution to climate change, or rather to take collective action with others to ratify structural change. However, to our knowledge, no theorist takes the position that individuals have no responsibility at all to seek out climate justice. In this salient sense, every philosopher contributing to the literature on individual climate responsibilities is an individualist. This is to say, there seems to be strong agreement that, in the absence of effective institutions, the responsibility falls back on the citizens to solve the problem themselves or create new institutions to do the job.³¹

At first, this might seem surprising, as it runs against one tempting thought: ‘If the world’s leaders and institutions are failing to deal with climate change ... how does that suddenly become *my* problem?’³² This objection overlooks how effective institutions rely on the active participation of its citizens to enact justice, and naively seems to discard the inconveniences of non-ideal circumstances.³³ The better the institutions are working, the fewer direct demands to enact justice fall on the individual.³⁴ But this comes with an inconvenient corollary: the more radically institutions fail to enact justice themselves, the greater direct demands to enact justice fall on the individual. Yet circumstances of radical institutional failure are those circumstances where despair is also most common. This should make the importance of resisting despair and acting in hope even more stark. The moral obligation to act in hope is a derivative obligation that follows from the responsibility of citizens to take up the duties of their failed institutions. The imperative to act in hope follows from the proposition that living a life in despair – never fighting for justice or thinking to

demand it, thereby failing the moral obligation to fix or pick up the slack of their failed institutions – is itself morally wrong.

Oppression and hope

The derivative nature of one's obligation to act in hope may entail a subtle exception to the obligation. As members of oppressed groups suffer the most from unjust laws and institutions, one might think that they have more reason than any – and perhaps, accordingly, the greatest obligation of all – to act in hope to resist their oppressors. However, Katie Stockdale questions whether hope really is 'practically rational for members of oppressed groups in resisting their own oppression'.³⁵ In support of this idea, she quotes Derrick Bell, who suggests 'the worship of equality rules as having absolute power benefits whites by preserving a benevolent but fictional self-image, and such worship benefits [Black people] by preserving hope. But I think we've arrived at a place in history where the harms of such worship outweigh the benefits'.³⁶ Stockdale interprets Bell to mean that hope among oppressed people, even if beneficial for emotional well-being, can sustain a 'dangerous illusion of comfort in a system that is failing' and cause them to misdirect their agency in ways that will even be detrimental to the fulfilment of their desires.³⁷ Hope that their actions will make a difference may be false hope, Stockdale suggests, as 'members of oppressed groups are often forced to rely on the agency of privileged groups to realize their hopes'.³⁸ This is a key point. If Stockdale is right in her analysis, the agency and activism of the oppressed are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for just institutions. Agency and activism are not necessary because the privileged have the power to promote just institutions successfully, and they are not sufficient due to their dependency on the agency of the oppressed. Therefore, it would not be the case that unjust institutions depend on the passivity

of the oppressed in the same way that they rely on the passivity of more privileged citizens. As this was the foundation of the moral obligation to act in hope, then oppressed people would not have the same obligations to act in hope.

But is Stockdale right? In part, yes. Derrick Bell did believe that trust in institutions, law and traditional means of reform was counterproductive. Once, the nineteenth-century African American social reformer Frederick Douglass likened mature nations to ‘great streams ... not easily turned from channels, worn deep in the course of ages’. No matter the tumult, they ‘gradually flow back to the same old channel, and flow on as serenely as ever’.³⁹ In 1855, this thought brought hope: there was consolation in the idea that America was more a young brook than a great stream. By now, however, the belief that America’s oppressive institutions, deeply entrenched by history, could correct themselves is probably a form of what Victoria McGeer calls ‘wishful hope’.⁴⁰ Such hope, McGeer explains, is fanciful insofar as it has a ‘high dependence on external powers for bringing ... hopes about’.⁴¹ Such dependence is especially wishful when the external powers on which one depends have historically been unreliable. Wishful hope cultivates passivity by encouraging a view of the world as, in Stockdale’s words, ‘tilting in our favor’, even when the evidence suggests otherwise. This idea echoes the popular slogan ‘the long arc of history bends towards justice’. Bell *did* reject such wishful hope. This world view may seem plausible when progress is measured by formal legal victories but falls apart when one recognises that just laws ‘in the books’ do not equate to just laws in action.⁴² Racism, Bell insists, is a permanent fixture of the American politic, regardless of the letter of the law.

Yet, Stockdale is too quick in interpreting Bell as scorning the practical rationality of hope *simpliciter*. In talking about hope so generally, Stockdale obscures myriad ways oppressed people can justifiably act in hope. Manifestly, Bell does not argue that the permanence of racism entails that one should succumb to despair, or that individual or

collective action is futile. The notion that racism can be fully eliminated is a utopian hope that Bell certainly considers unhelpful; yet, acknowledging the permanence of racism does not preclude modest hope in more achievable targets. Specifically, Bell argues that engaging in genuine service requires humility. This humility has two prongs. First, it recognises that in a deeply unjust society ‘our actions are not likely to lead to transcendent change and may indeed, despite our best efforts, be of more help to the system we despise than to the victims of that system whom we are trying to help’.⁴³ Accordingly, one should not measure the value of one’s actions by their likely contribution to traditional goals; this is a shaky foundation at best. Yet humility also invites one to recognise how ‘continued struggle can bring about unexpected benefits and gains that in themselves justify continued endeavor’.⁴⁴ Moreover, humility invites us to forgo civil rights remedies ‘we may think appropriate and the law may even require, but that the victims of discrimination have rejected’.⁴⁵ This pragmatic perspective leaves no room for giving up, for acting in despair, but may change what acting in hope looks like.

Malcolm X once observed that the only socially tolerated forms of struggle for racial justice were those ‘within the ground rules that the people you’re struggling against have laid down’.⁴⁶ Such ground rules emphasise legal mechanisms for social reform: voting, lawsuits, letter-writing and peaceful protest within approved parameters. Historically, political activism has heavily relied on such strategies. While conventional political action can be effective at facilitating legal change, these legal victories often do not result in material differences in the lives of the supposed beneficiaries. Moreover, the success of such strategies turns on the agency of the oppressors; this, Stockdale was right about. As argued, hope in such tactics is likely wishful hope, and this wishful hope may misdirect the agencies of oppressed people by sustaining their faith in ineffective, albeit socially sanctioned, strategies. But she fails to consider that hope in alternative ways of resistance may be more justified.

Bell argues that it is critical that one recognises both ‘the futility of action – where action is more civil rights strategies destined to fail – *and* the unalterable conviction that something must be done, that action must be taken’.⁴⁷ But if traditional strategies have not worked, what is left?

Well, everything else. We use the term ‘extra-political action’ to refer to forms of struggle outside conventional political action.⁴⁸ We take the Black Panthers’ Free Breakfast for School Children Program to be a paradigmatic example of the potential of extra-political action. In 1969, the nationally villainised Black Panther Party (BPP) organised a free breakfast program that at its peak fed thousands of children per day.⁴⁹ Spearheaded by Elaine Brown, this was part of a push to uplift and empower the Black community in the United States through providing services not offered by the federal or state government. This proved to be a remarkable form of resistance. The FBI head at the time, J. Edgar Hoover, called the program ‘potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for’.⁵⁰ After extended effort by the federal government to undermine it, the programme broke up, but not before its public visibility pressured political leaders to do what they should have done all along. In 1975, the School Breakfast Program was permanently authorised, which now feeds over 14 million US children before school. And this is only one example. When public institutions drastically failed their communities, the BPP picked up the slack by providing community services in response to the concrete needs of their people, and in the process achieved significant institutional change.

There are many kinds of extra-political action: from unilateral action in the form of donation or volunteering, to community and coalitional organising, to independent or collective awareness campaigns, to sabotage, disruptive or destructive protest, and even violent revolution. Despite their differences, such extra-political strategies tend to pursue hopes within one’s agency to affect even in oppressive conditions: from helping a few people

worse off than oneself, joining with other affected groups to resolve local problems and forcing the complicit to confront the injustice around them, to obstructing and destroying the physical instruments of injustice and revolting against oppressive violence. When employed strategically, such tactics return agency to the oppressed. In summary, hope *is* practically rational for oppressed groups; despite their oppressive environments, they retain agency to enact a more just future even if largely in measured, local ways and even if there is no guarantee that any single act of resistance will succeed.

Still, it remains true that some hopes – namely, for transcendent institutional and legal change that truly improves the lives of the worst off – require the agency of privileged groups. Despite the very real ways oppressed people can employ their agency to resist unjust outcomes, so long as oppressive structures remain, their efforts will be akin to paddling upriver. To change the current itself, action of the privileged is usually required. While both the oppressed and the privileged have agency, the privileged have more power to manipulate formal mechanisms to change laws and institutions. The acts of hope of the oppressed are acts of resistance against antagonistic individuals and institutions with far greater power than themselves. This makes the oppressed's duty to act in hope more nuanced, as we have seen, and likely significantly diminishes the appropriateness of blame.⁵¹ However, privileged people usually have more time, resources and social capital that both increase the likelihood their efforts will succeed and makes the event of their failure far less costly. These factors – their additional power and the diminished cost of failure – put further normative force behind the moral obligation on the privileged to act in hope.

Yet, even as the moral obligation of the privileged to act in hope becomes clear, and even if many amongst them ostensibly experience many enabling conditions for hope, it is not altogether surprising that despair may be common among the privileged. We propose such despair is often a manifestation of moral corruption.⁵² Moral corruption, roughly put, is

the tendency to either explicitly or implicitly obscure the morally salient features of one's situation to avoid or downplay what one morally must do. Those that have previously or continue to benefit from and perpetuate unjust societal structures may be particularly prone to doubt that the needed structural change is possible in the first place. After all, the pursuit of justice is rarely in the interest of the privileged and most powerful. Therefore, not only is the despair of the privileged incompatible with a just societal order, but it may be especially hard to morally excuse.

THE ETHICS OF HOPING FOR A MORE JUST CLIMATE FUTURE

With the political importance of hope clear, DfD loses its grip. In a political context, acting in despair is to fail to demand justice – a moral imperative. So long as a more just climate future remains possible, one has the moral obligation to act in hope to achieve it. As a matter of justice, then, acting in despair is *ceteris paribus* morally wrong. To quote John Nolt, 'despair unfits us for service to others', and therefore hope must be upheld.⁵³ A life of climate despair violates this general requirement, and therefore a life lived in climate despair is morally wrong. Therefore, obligations to alter or abandon such a life cannot be dismissed as too demanding.

But what does acting in hope for a more just climate future look like? This is a highly contextual question that we cannot fully resolve here but still merits some initial discussion. One salient consideration is that rising greenhouse gas emissions result from a global energy infrastructure dependent on fossil fuels. So, for the privileged, holding policymakers to account as a means of changing these carbon-intensive structures is an essential part of acting in climate hope. This is especially critical for privileged citizens of developed nations like the United States, as their governments have high historical emissions and the wealth to invest in

both mitigation and adaptation strategies.⁵⁴ The privileged citizens of such countries have a duty not to settle for more empty promises and moral posturing from their policymakers, but to demand legislation that takes specific steps towards a just transition away from fossil fuels.

Yet, the last three decades of political procrastination give reason to worry that robust climate action on the part of high-emitting governments is not forthcoming. Moreover, as pointed out in the last section, disenfranchised groups lack the power to directly influence the law and institutions that greatly impact them. The climate context makes this concern particularly stark; citizens of developing countries and the disenfranchised in developed countries demonstrably have little ability to directly influence the global actors whose choices will overwhelmingly determine the extent of global warming. In this sense, relying on political action as a primary form of resistance may be fraught. For individuals in disenfranchised groups, then, extra-political climate action may be just as important as conventional political action on the part of the privileged. One promising example of extra-political action is the Great Green Wall project. In the 1970s, vast tracks of fertile land in the African Sahel became degraded due to a combination of climate change and unsustainable land practices. Yet, ‘in the face of [these] increasingly desperate circumstances, community leaders and political visionaries alike started to look for long-term solutions’.⁵⁵ This collective effort culminated in an effort to plant trees across the width of Africa, which would ‘transform the lives of millions living on the front line of climate change by restoring agricultural land ruined by decades of overuse’.⁵⁶ In 2007, this effort began in earnest under the leadership of the African Union. Before long, this grassroots initiative received global attention, and today it receives funding from the World Bank, the European Union and the United Nations.⁵⁷ Once again, a grassroots movement galvanised institutional change. By the time the wall of trees is complete in 2030, the restored land is expected to absorb 250 million metric tons of carbon dioxide.⁵⁸

This is just one example. The most exciting aspect of extra-political action is its boundless potential; it is a catch-all contrastive category defined as an alternative to conventional political action. The opportunities for extra-political climate action are nearly endless, and are available to both the privileged and the oppressed to explore. This category certainly includes actions like eco-sabotage that serve to destroy or disrupt fossil fuel infrastructure and other instruments of environmental destruction, but also decentralised adaptation efforts by communities and coalitions determined to pick up the slack of failing national and international governments. Individuals can assist these efforts by dedicating their financial assistance and time and directing their energy towards making their social spheres – their workplace, neighbourhood, family or friends – more climate-conscious, sustainable and resilient. Extra-political action is likely to be especially effective when exercised in places with social connection and influence, which varies significantly case by case. It is too soon to tell whether any single extra-political climate action will prove effective, but that is the point. While there is no guarantee of success, so much activism has not been tried; there is unbound possibility in new tactics of resistance.

However, we do not mean to suggest that all extra-political actions are justified or effective. There may be sufficiently strong moral reasons against some forms of extra-political climate action, such as so-called eco-terrorism.⁵⁹ And other extra-political actions may be morally permissible, but only questionably effective. The most relevant example, in fact, is reducing personal ‘low-hanging fruit’ emissions. On the one hand, individual emissions reductions can stand as a principled form of protest against widespread climate indifference. Furthermore, as we have argued, demandingness from despair certainly does not justify thoughtless emitting. This said, it does seem like there are substantial structural barriers to emissions reductions making a difference.⁶⁰ The advisability of committing one’s time to this form of climate action likely turns on the degree to which they distract from

pursuing forms of climate action that do not face such barriers. While the answer to this question is contextual, we do find it very plausible that individuals may pursue ‘low-hanging fruit’ reductions as alternatives to more effective forms of climate action. In fact, if one decides that climate catastrophe is inevitable, they may resign themselves to just doing whatever they can to keep their hands (relatively) clean. In this case, fixation on individual emissions reductions could even be a form of acting in despair.⁶¹

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have considered a specific kind of objection against the view that individuals have moral obligations to take climate action. We called this objection ‘demandingness from despair’. We answered this objection by pointing to how living in despair pre-empts individuals from fulfilling their moral responsibilities – namely, their moral obligations to resist injustice. Therefore, we maintain that individuals have moral obligations to act in hope: to act as one ought if the object of one’s hope were possible. For the privileged, acting in hope in unjust circumstances might involve leveraging conventional political action to change or replace unjust institutions. For the oppressed and disenfranchised, acting in hope may more often involve utilising extra-political strategies to resist injustice. We then applied our analysis to climate change, and briefly considered what acting in hope for a more just climate future looks like.

Yet, one might object that even if one grants the derivative obligation to act in hope, it is not clear that people are required to act on climate change rather than the innumerable other injustices we are currently failing to address through collective action.⁶² The moral obligation to act on every injustice in such a tragically unjust world would almost surely be overdemanding, and perhaps literally impossible. If so, then one’s duty would not be to act in

hope on climate specifically but to act in hope in pursuit of a more just future. To a degree, we simply concede this point. However, at least two considerations severely limit the scope of the objection.

First, our intention has not been to convince the privileged or the oppressed to focus on climate change at the exclusion of other issues. Our primary purpose has been to challenge a specific type of person who cares deeply about the climate and yet chooses not to act due to their despair. We suspect that there is a strong correlation between people most inclined to climate despair and those most concerned about our climate future. After all, the individuals most prone to climate despair are those ecologically informed and committed to the well-being of the Earth and its ecosystems. Yet this also describes the person most likely to take direct action on climate were it not for their despair. Moreover, the privileged among this group has the means to make the most difference to climate outcomes with the least personal cost. So, by giving them moral and practical reasons to act in hope we aim to offer the theoretical tools they can use to channel their environmental values constructively. In this sense, our argument is not merely intended to be moralising but also motivational. So, our first reply to the objection is this: the type of person we wrote this article primarily for should themselves choose to act in hope for the climate.

Our second response is that implicit in this objection's framing is the idea that issues of climate justice and justice writ large are mutually exclusive. However, this could not be further from the truth. First, it is common to frame the climate crisis as a symptom of a deeper problem. Marxists often argue that climate change results from unchecked capitalism and economic exploitation, and eco-feminists argue that environmental destruction is a symptom of the masculine impulse for domination.⁶³ Second, as is emphasised in the literature, climate change exacerbates pre-existing inequalities and patterns of oppression. For example, some scholars have highlighted the ongoing injustice of climate colonialism,

which involves ‘the expansion of foreign domination by initiatives that respond to climate change’.⁶⁴ Moreover, climate impacts have so far been experienced disproportionately by the already marginalised and worse-off. In practice, it is difficult to find a form of social injustice that does not intersect in one way or another with climate change. Empowering marginalised and exploited groups will at minimum reduce the unequal impacts of climate change by promoting their self-determination, but may also even mitigate the extent of global warming. Action on these other issues, therefore, is action on climate.

Finally, there may have been another worry lingering in readers’ minds for a while: can one *choose* to hope? If not, can one ever be *morally required* to hope? This happens to be one of the many points of contention within the literature. But, at the very least, it is not obvious that hope is not under one’s control to some extent.⁶⁵ Rebecca Solnit remarks that, often, despair is ‘a kind of fatigue, a loss of faith, that can be overcome, or even an indulgence’.⁶⁶ Later, she says that despair often seems to be ‘a bad habit and a reflex’, and that she’s noticed ‘a lot of people respond to almost any achievement, positive development, or outright victory with “yes but”’.⁶⁷ In any case, even if one does not have control over how they hope, one certainly has control over how they *act* in response to their hope or despair. We chose to argue for the moral obligation to act in hope, rather than hope *simpliciter*, in part to sidestep ‘ought implies can’ objections.⁶⁸ However, this is not to dismiss the moral importance of hope itself. We tentatively suggest that hope is a moral virtue insofar as hope eases the difficulty in fulfilling one’s moral obligation to *act* in hope. Hopefulness, therefore, is a temperament that should be politically and personally promoted.⁶⁹

Of course, the moral obligation to act in hope does not mean one should not feel grief. After all, climate change has already negatively impacted many communities around the world. If anything, grief seems morally appropriate. Nonetheless, acting in hope might temper such grief. For acting in hope restricts the degree to which one may grieve for the

future, as hope recognises the possibility of a more just tomorrow. Therefore, climate hope encourages one to feel empowered by one's individual or collective actions; whereas someone withdrawing in despair might dwell on the horrors ahead or refuse to think of the future altogether, now that they may imagine the positive possibilities that remain. As James Baldwin once said, 'Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced'.⁷⁰

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¹ During the 2015 Paris climate negotiations, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change set the goal of limiting global warming to ‘well above 2, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius’ (Paris Agreement. Article 2).

² SR1.5 IPCC., p.17.

³ As discussed at greater length below, we understand philosophical despair to be hope’s opposite. While there is significant philosophical disagreement regarding the edge cases of what constitutes hope, there is general agreement that hope involves at least the desire for an outcome and the belief that the attainment of that outcome is possible but not certain (see Stockdale 2019: 29). We affirm this minimal conception of hope, while remaining neutral on whether there are further constitutive features of hope. Our argument should be consistent with most views on this issue.

⁴ Here, we assume that many of those concerned about climate change despair for justice in a philosophical sense, triggering affect that pre-empts action. We are not addressing this paper to the neurodivergent suffering from clinical depression and other mental illnesses that stymie their action, although colloquially this may also be described as despair.

⁵ Smart and Williams (1973: 116–117).

⁶ Fragniere (2016).

⁷ Fragniere (2016: 809). Fragniere writes that ‘most writers agree that individuals have a duty to take at least some steps to reduce their [greenhouse gas] emissions’, but that ‘the extent of one’s duties depends heavily on the particular circumstances of the agent and the cost of complying with them’. To affirm this general consensus is not to erase those philosophers

inclined to dismiss individual obligations entirely. Cullity (2015), Johnson (2003), Maltais (2011), Sandberg (2011) and Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) all defend roughly this position. More recently, Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong (2018), Maclean (2019) and Shahar (2016) have bolstered this general position further.

⁸ Hickman et al. (2021).

⁹ Hickman et al. (2021: 2).

¹⁰ Clayton et al. (2017).

¹¹ Clayton et al. (2017: 7).

¹² For two recent examples, see Fragniere (2018: 657–658) and Hedberg (2018: 72–73).

¹³ One possible duty that might ostensibly survive DfD would be the obligation to vote Green, as this responsibility may only arise every other year or so (Maltais 2013: 602). Yet there is significant effort required to assess political candidates on their climate record and agenda. The duty to vote Green is more involved than simply ticking a box at the polling station; to fulfil this obligation well, one must dedicate substantial time contemplating climate politics.

¹⁴ Raz (1986: 410).

¹⁵ Waterworth (2004: 29).

¹⁶ Calhoun (2018: 70).

¹⁷ Pettit (2004: 158).

¹⁸ For instance, Adrienne Martin challenges Pettit's decision to contrast hope with precaution (Martin 2014: 33). For the purposes of this article, we are not committed to, or even endorse, Pettit's account of hope. Rather, we find it illustrative, as we go on to explain.

¹⁹ Waterworth (2004: 29).

²⁰ Solnit (2016: 109–110).

²¹ Pettit (2004).

²² Solnit (2016: xix).

²³ Solnit (2016: 109).

²⁴ UNN (2020).

²⁵ UNN (2020).

²⁶ We borrow the distinction between utopian and modest hopes from Katie Stockdale (2021: 125). Stockdale defines utopian hope as 'a state in which there would be no more moral work left to do but to maintain the end we have reached. The utopian hope for complete justice is thus a hope whose realization would radically transform the world such that a moral idea of complete justice, the object of hope, is obtained' (ibid.: 176). She contrasts this type of hope with modest hope, where 'we hope for small victories that will improve the world for the better, however slightly, and however long those improvements last' (ibid.: 176). For our purposes, we adopt this terminology while resisting Stockdale's characterisation of modest hope. We use the term 'modest hope' to refer to any and all hopes that are not utopian hopes. However, even modest hope may still be extremely ambitious, and result in big victories that

improve the world substantially. In our analysis, then, modest hope is not limited to incrementalism as it appears to be in Stockdale's account.

²⁷ Quotation from Watts (2018).

²⁸ Moellendorf (2006: 423).

²⁹ Moellendorf (2006: 423–424).

³⁰ Moellendorf (2006: 425).

³¹ Stephen Gardiner argues this duty flows from the delegatory nature of institutions: 'If political institutions normally operate under delegated authority from the citizens ... then ... [when] the attempt to delegate effectively has failed, then the responsibility falls back on the citizens again' (Gardiner 2011: 54.) See also Cripps (2013: 142).

³² Gardiner (2011: 54).

³³ On institutions and the active participation of citizens, see Young (2011: 169).

³⁴ Gardiner (2011: 55).

³⁵ Stockdale (2019: 37).

³⁶ Bell (1992: 101).

³⁷ Stockdale (2019: 37).

³⁸ Stockdale (2019: 39).

³⁹ Douglass (1852: 59).

⁴⁰ McGeer (2004: 110).

⁴¹ McGeer (2004: 113).

⁴² Bell (1992: 101). See also Alexander (2010).

⁴³ Bell (1992: 198–199).

⁴⁴ Bell (1992: 199).

⁴⁵ Bell (1992: 199).

⁴⁶ X (1965).

⁴⁷ Bell (1992: 199).

⁴⁸ Some may be inclined to include what we term ‘extra-political action’ strategies in their broad notion of political action. For example, feminists have long argued that the ‘personal is political’. This is a mere terminological disagreement. For present purposes, we reserve ‘political’ to mean electoral politics and other sanctioned strategies of social reform.

⁴⁹ Blakemore (2021).

⁵⁰ Blakemore (2021).

⁵¹ We suggest this tentatively. The blameworthiness of oppressed people acting in despair deserves a separate article.

⁵² Gardiner (2006: 407–409).

⁵³ Nolt (2010: 166–167).

⁵⁴ Two widely-cited principles – polluter pays and ability-to-pay – suggest that developed countries should take on the greatest burdens associated with decarbonisation. For a discussion of these issues, see Caney (2010).

⁵⁵ GGW (n.d.).

⁵⁶ Baker and Toubab (2019).

⁵⁷ Baker and Toubab (2019). It is worth noting that while this newfound funding has enabled the Great Green Wall to expand at rapid scales, some have raised concerns that the project is no longer under the control of local decision-makers and may be insensitive to adverse impacts on local populations. See BWP (2021).

⁵⁸ Baker and Toubab (2019).

⁵⁹ That said, one should be highly sceptical of moral objections on the part of the privileged to the ways the oppressed and disenfranchised choose to resist.

⁶⁰ All the same, some argue that individual emissions do indeed make a difference (e.g. Broome 2019).

⁶¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.

⁶² We thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing this concern.

⁶³ For the Marxist perspective, see Malm (2016). For the eco-feminist perspective, see e.g. Merchant (1980).

⁶⁴ Táíwò (2019).

⁶⁵ For one exchange on this matter, see Waterworth (2004: 101).

⁶⁶ Solnit (2016: 25).

⁶⁷ Solnit (2016: 108).

⁶⁸ This principle is often attributed to Immanuel Kant, and posits (roughly) that one can only be morally asked to do what it is *possible* to do. For a discussion of this issue, see Kohl (2015).

⁶⁹ Notably, Stockdale – and others – might argue that there are ways to act in hope *without* hope. For example, she suggests that James Baldwin resisted injustice out of bitterness, and Derrick Bell resisted injustice out of faith. As discussed in the case of Bell, we have our doubts that either individual lacked hope or dismissed its value. We also question whether dispositions such as bitterness or faith will cause one to act in hope in a fashion appropriately responsive to the evidence, but discussing this issue is something that space precludes discussion of here.

⁷⁰ Baldwin (1962).