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Michael D. Doan

When confronted with especially complex ecological and social problems such as climate change, how are we to think about responsibility for collective inaction? Social and political philosophers have begun to consider the complexities of acting collectively with a view to creating more just and sustainable societies. Some have recently turned their attention to the question of whether more or less formally organized groups can ever be held morally responsible for not acting collectively, or else for not organizing themselves into groups capable of so doing. In this paper I argue that several questionable assumptions have shaped the character and scope of inquiry to this point, precluding us from grappling with a range of important questions concerning the epistemic dimensions of collective inaction. I offer an overview of recent conversation concerning collective inaction, advance a critique of the picture of responsibility that has emerged from this conversation, and propose an alternative approach to thinking about responsibility for collective inaction. I argue that sharing responsibility for participating in collective action often entails a further responsibility for engaging in collective inquiry, and a corresponding openness to reforming and transforming shared epistemic resources.

Keywords: Collective Action; Collective Inaction; Collective Responsibility; Climate Change; Collective Inquiry

1. Introduction

Deeply entrenched ecological and social injustices can only be addressed when groups of individuals join forces, get organized and take action together. Social and political philosophers have begun to consider the complexities of acting

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collectively with a view to creating more just and sustainable societies. Some have recently turned their attention to the question of whether more or less formally organized groups can ever be held morally responsible for not acting collectively, or else for not organizing themselves into groups capable of so doing (that is, for their collective *in*action). In this paper my focus will be on several questionable assumptions that have shaped the character and scope of inquiry to this point. I will argue that these assumptions unhelpfully constrain our thinking about collective responsibility, precluding us from grappling with a range of important questions concerning the epistemic dimensions of collective inaction.

This paper proceeds in three parts. First, I offer an overview of recent conversation concerning responsibility for collective inaction. Second, I advance a critique of the picture of responsibility that has emerged from this conversation. Third, I propose an alternative approach to thinking about responsibility for collective inaction. I argue that sharing responsibility for participating in collective action often entails a further responsibility for engaging in collective inquiry, and a corresponding openness to reforming and transforming shared epistemic resources.

2. Responsibility for Collective Inaction

In a widely influential paper from 1970, Virginia Held asks: can a random collection of individuals ever be held morally responsible for not acting collectively, or else for not organizing itself into a group capable of deciding upon a course of collective action? To the surprise of many philosophers, including those who are most sympathetic to the idea of collective responsibility, Held argues for affirmative answers to both questions. She claims, on the one hand, that "when the action called for in a given situation is obvious to the reasonable person and when the expected outcome of the action is clearly favorable, a random collection of individuals may be held responsible for not taking a collective action"; and on the other hand, that "when the action called for is not obvious to the reasonable person, a random collection may not be held responsible for not performing the action in question, but, in some cases, may be held responsible for not forming itself into an organized group capable of deciding which action to take" (Held 1970, 476). Simply put, even a group of complete strangers can sometimes be blamed for failing to come together, get organized and take action as a group.

Held's conclusions have inspired considerable controversy. Seeing as how what she calls a "random collection of individuals" has no decision-making procedure in place, and its members do not display much, if any, solidarity, her claim that a collection of this type can sometimes be blamed *as a group* for not acting collectively has struck many as counterintuitive. As Smiley (2011) observes, since philosophers typically take possession of a more or less formal decision-making procedure to be a necessary condition for collective intentional action (and hence for genuine expressions of collective agency), mobs, random collections and other so-called "aggregate" collectivities are "usually rejected as candidates for collective

responsibility by many of those who otherwise find the notion of collective responsibility to be very useful."

Nevertheless, over the past 45 years Held has been joined by May (1990), Copp (1991), Tännsjö (2007), Petersson (2008) and Isaacs (2011), each of whom subscribes to a non-reductionist notion of collective agency and contends that a random collection of individuals can sometimes be blamed for failing to act collectively. As May observes, contributors to this conversation have been primarily concerned with "the retrospective moral criticism of a group for allowing a particular harm to occur," particularly in situations involving merely "putative" or "loosely structured groups" which "are not formally organized and as a result lack a decision-making apparatus" (1990, 270). The main sources of internal disagreement among contributors have been over the conditions under which a random collection of individuals could have avoided collective inaction and ought to have acted collectively; the conditions under which a random collection as such, as opposed to its individual members, has failed to perform an action; and how responsibility should be distributed among the members of a random collection who have failed to act collectively or organize themselves into a group capable of so doing.

Setting aside subtle differences among the positions philosophers have taken on these matters, my focus here will be on what their approaches to thinking about responsibility for collective inaction share in common. From a methodological standpoint, each contributor's arguments make use of thought experiments featuring relatively simple bystander cases—sometimes called "coordinated bystander cases" (Isaacs 2011, 143). In such cases, a particular harm cannot be prevented through the isolated, uncoordinated actions of individuals, but only through a collective action undertaken by an (as of yet unformed) organized group. Consider, for example, Held's "bystanders to a strangling"[1] case:

> Assume that there are seven apparently normal persons in a subway car; none is acquainted with any other; none are sitting together. The second smallest person of the seven rises, pushes the smallest to the floor, and, in full view and hearing of the remaining five, proceeds to beat and to strangle his victim. If the remaining five persons do nothing for, say, ten minutes, at the end of which time interval the smallest person is dead, would we be able to make a valid judgment that "they ought to have subdued the strangler"? (1970, 477)

Notice that the assault can only be thwarted through a collective action undertaken by two or more of the strangers. Given that the type of collective action the strangers would need to take is "clear" or "obvious to the reasonable person," and they could have joined forces in time to perform the action in question, Held suggests we are entitled to hold them responsible, as a group, for failing to act collectively.

Held appeals to four such thought experiments in the course of motivating her central claims. To this list can be added May's "bystanders to a drowning child" case; Copp's "bystanders to homelessness" and "world hunger" cases; Tännsjö's "bystanders to pushing a car up a hill" case; and Isaacs' "bystanders to a river rafting disaster" case, among others. While each philosopher employs a similar

methodology and focuses on cases conforming to a similar mold, of particular interest for my purposes here are the implications Isaacs has recently drawn from their respective analyses in her book, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts* (2011). Before we turn to Isaacs' work, though, recall that decades-long conversation concerning responsibility for collective inaction was originally focused on the *retrospective* moral criticism of random collections. Isaacs has recently shifted the focus by asking: what do these perspectives on collective inaction have to tell us about our *present* responsibilities with respect to some of the most urgent and complex problems confronting us, including climate change, ecological destruction, and global and domestic poverty?[2]

Isaacs is concerned that adopting an individualistic point of view on such complex problems as climate change encourages us to abdicate responsibility for addressing them, seeing as how as individuals we cannot make much of a difference on our own (see also Cuomo 2011; Doan 2014). As a way out of this dead end, she suggests that adopting a collective point of view is helpful when it comes to "charting the territory of individual obligation," for mappings of this sort help us to imagine ourselves into the roles we might assume in a more tightly coordinated response. Isaacs argues that the notion of *collective obligation* is helpful for generating more determinate responsibilities for individuals, even for those of us who find ourselves in circumstances where a collective agent capable of solving a particular problem has yet to take shape. For given that collective action solutions "map easily" onto problems that demand nothing short of a coordinated response, at the collective level "there is more clarity concerning what might help" (Isaacs 2011, 140, 141).

How exactly is the notion of collective obligation supposed to be helpful in clarifying our responsibilities as individuals? Consider, for example, Isaacs' "bystanders to a river rafting disaster" case:

> Four bystanders are relaxing on the riverbank when six children on a raft run into trouble when they and their raft end up in rapids. They are hurtling helplessly toward a dangerous waterfall and are unlikely to survive if they go over it. Nothing any of the four bystanders can do as an individual will make a difference, but there is an obvious course of coordinated action they could take to divert the raft into calmer waters. This measure would pose little risk to the bystanders and would save all of the children. (2011, 243)

In this case, claims Isaacs, "there is a clear map between the situation, the required course of [collective] action and a collective agent," albeit an agent that has yet to take shape (143). For example, the four bystanders could join forces to hoist a stray log into the rushing waters, laying down a blockade that alters the course of the raft while also serving as a bridge for transporting the children back onto the riverbank.

To clarify, when Isaacs speaks in terms of there being a more or less "clear map," and of a collective action solution "mapping easily" onto a given situation, she is referring to the degree of "exactness" in the mapping of each person's

responsibilities onto the situation in question. A more exact mapping presents a narrower range of options for a putative group ("*we* could hoist this log into the river if everyone banded together to help carry it"), and hence greater clarity concerning what each group member is responsible for doing as an individual ("*I'd* better grab this end and start lifting"). As Isaacs explains, "when collective action solutions come into focus and potential collective agents with relatively clear identities emerge as the subjects of those actions, then we may understand individual obligations … as flowing from collective obligations that those potential agents would have" (2011, 140).

Once a clear collective action solution in which the individual members of a random collection could participate has emerged, Isaacs claims those individuals are morally obligated to organize themselves into an appropriately structured group and to perform the action in question—or else fail to "do their part." Interestingly, Isaacs is committed to the claim that the members of a random collection are responsible for coming together and acting collectively when—and *only* when—a collective action solution has, as she puts it, "come into focus." Drawing inspiration from Held's earlier work, Isaacs suggests that the collective obligation to implement a given collective action solution "exists in virtue of the clarity, by the standard of the reasonable person, of the collective action required" (2011, 148). Hence, "Where there is a lack of clarity at the collective level, what is lacking is a clear picture of what collective course of action would effectively address the moral concern" (148). On her Heldian view,

> Only when the course of [collective] action presenting itself is clear to the reasonable person is it accurate to think in terms of the collective obligations of putative groups. *Clarity at the collective level is a prerequisite for collective obligation in these cases, and that clarity serves as a lens through which the obligations of individuals come into focus.* (152, my emphasis)

So, when a loosely structured group is confronted with a problem that calls for nothing short of a coordinated response, yet no clear collective action solution has yet presented itself to each of the individuals involved, Isaacs claims that "there is no putative [collective] obligation through which to understand individual contributions," and hence "no mechanism for morally requiring that individuals coordinate their actions in a manner that would address the issue at hand" (149, 153).

In summary, whereas conversation concerning responsibility for collective inaction was originally focused on the *retrospective* moral criticism of random collections, Isaacs has recently shifted the focus to our *present* responsibilities to participate in collective action. Isaacs is just one of the contributors to this conversation who have drawn several important lessons from their analyses of relatively simple coordinated bystander cases—lessons which she has more recently applied to situations of collective inaction with respect to far more complex problems, such as climate change, ecological destruction, and global and domestic poverty. The most striking result of these applications is that members of merely putative

or loosely structured groups turn out to be under *no obligation whatsoever* to come together, get organized and act collectively with a view to addressing such problems—at least, that is, until a clear and definitive collective action solution tailored specially to each problem has somehow "come into focus."

I will now proceed to offer a critique of this shared approach to thinking about responsibility for collective inaction. My focus will be on several questionable assumptions that have shaped the character and scope of inquiry to this point, precluding us from grappling with a range of important questions concerning the epistemic dimensions of collective inaction. To anticipate, my primary focus will be on what I call the *knowledge condition*—the assumption that, with respect to any problem that demands nothing short of a coordinated response, knowledge of a clear and definitive collective action solution on the part of individuals is a prerequisite for moral responsibility. This assumption expresses a substantive view about the conditions under which we should see ourselves and others as sharing responsibility for working together to address impending crises and catastrophes, not to mention many already present disasters, delineating a region within which various ethical assessments are appropriate for ourselves and for others. Yet it is hardly self-evident, and has yet to be defended.

3. Scrutinizing the Knowledge Condition

In this section I offer a critique of the approach to thinking about responsibility for collective inaction explored above. My focus will be on situations of collective inaction with respect to climate change, first and foremost because reducing the harms of climate change is among the most urgent challenges of our time, and also because a challenge of this magnitude and complexity serves as an illustrative "test case" for aspiring theories of collective responsibility, which are ostensibly meant to be helpful in channeling our collective energies towards critically important practical needs. Many peoples' lives and communities have already been affected by climate change impacts,[3] and stand to be yet more severely affected in coming years, whether through forced displacements and relocations due to rising sea levels, threats to community food security and alterations in traditional agricultural practices due to changing growing seasons, or compromised health due to the depletion and desertification of freshwater commons, to name but a few of many significant harms. In other words, *all of us have been and will be affected by climate change*, though in different ways and to different degrees. Thus, I take it that a crucial measure of any theory of collective responsibility is whether it is actually animated by, and works to serve the needs of, those facing the real-world problem of climate change.

Recall that the *knowledge condition* is the assumption that, with respect to any problem that demands nothing short of a coordinated response, knowledge of a clear and definitive collective action solution on the part of individuals is a prerequisite for moral responsibility. From Held and May through Isaacs this assumption

stands curiously undefended. However, while it may be plausible to suggest that the knowledge condition informs common ways of thinking about collective responsibility in the context of many small-scale coordinated bystanders cases, I will argue that its applicability to large-scale collective action problems is not only far from obvious but, in all likelihood, flatly inimical to working together to address problems of this sort. In the course of developing my critique, I will call the knowledge condition into question by unearthing and scrutinizing some of the assumptions undergirding it, and then by exploring some of the implications of incorporating it into our practices of holding ourselves and others responsible. My concerns are threefold: first, that the knowledge condition takes *epistemological individualism* for granted; second, that it sets an overly demanding epistemic standard for individual knowers; and third, that in so doing, it lends support to a malign form of *response skepticism*—that is, the use of uncertainty and perceived unclarity as moral justification for collective inaction with respect to climate change. I will elaborate on each concern in turn.

Before moving on, though, I want to pause to clarify one further point. It might be objected that Held is not obviously committed to the knowledge condition, or at least not in any straightforward way. After all, Held does claim that in problematic situations where "the action called for is not obvious to the reasonable person," a random collection may yet be held responsible for "not forming itself into a group capable of deciding which action to take" (Held 1970, 476). So, unlike Isaacs, Held holds that there are at least "some cases" (476) in which knowledge of a clear and definitive solution on the part of individuals is *not* a prerequisite for moral responsibility. She deserves credit, then, for emphasizing that we are sometimes called upon to activate those decision-making processes through which acting collectively becomes possible.

I agree that Held's position is subtler and more promising than that of Isaacs. Held certainly goes further in the direction of activating collectivity rather remaining stuck in impotent presumed individuality—from this I have learned a great deal, and for this I owe her a debt of gratitude. Nevertheless, I am concerned that her view does not go far enough. More specifically, I fear that it will still only be helpful in situations where (i) a single collective action will suffice to solve the problem at issue; (ii) that action is among the options presently available to a random collection; and (iii) the members of said collection already know enough to identify and choose correctly among available options. Thus, although Held may not hold that a random collection is only responsible for acting collectively when a solution *has already* "come into focus," she still seems to hold that our responsibility to engage in collective action is limited to those situations where a solution *can* be brought to light and decided upon, if only we would get on with organizing ourselves to that end. Evidently, then, Held is committed to the assumption that a collective action solution must at least be know*able* to the members of a loosely structured group (based on what they already know as individuals, and on their present possibilities for self-organization) before it makes sense to hold them

responsible for their collective inaction. Each of these ideas will be called into question in what follows.

3.1. Takes Epistemological Individualism for Granted

Epistemological individualism, as I refer to it here, is the notion that knowledge is a product of individual knowers coming to perceive, reason and know through the solitary exercise of their own cognitive capacities and utilizing their own epistemic resources. As many feminist epistemologists have noted, epistemological individualism entails a commitment to at least the following two claims: first, that it is individuals who are the primary producers, adjudicators and possessors of knowledge; and second, that although individual knowers "have bodies" and also tend to engage in social interactions of various sorts, their particular embodiments, identities and social positions are strictly irrelevant from the point of view of assessing their claims to know (see, e.g. Jaggar 1983; Scheman 1983; Longino 1990; Nelson 1990; Addelson and Potter 1991; Code 1991). In the words of Charles W. Mills, such individualism tends to teeter on the brink of solipsism while remaining "blithely indifferent to the possible cognitive consequences of class, racial, or gender situatedness (or, perhaps more accurately, taking a propertied white male standpoint as given)" (Mills 2007, 13). When it comes to generating analyses of and solutions to problems that call for coordinated responses, epistemological individualism entails a further commitment to the claim that such problem-solving activity is fundamentally an individual pursuit, for it is through the careful, sovereign thought processes of isolated knowers that the shapes of possible collective action solutions eventually come to be known by those same individuals.

To see how the knowledge condition takes epistemological individualism for granted, recall Isaacs' concern that adopting an individualistic point of view on climate change encourages people to abdicate responsibility for addressing it, and her suggestion that a collective point of view be adopted as a way out of this dead end. In recommending this gestalt shift, Isaacs tacitly assumes that it is a shift to be undergone by individuals who, upon reorienting their angle of vision will come to recognize practical possibilities they would not otherwise have been able to grasp. When we are presented with the familiar coordinated bystander scenarios that serve as the focal points of hers and other philosophers' accounts, it does seem plausible to suppose that individual (able-bodied, adult, etc.) knowers are, by and large, capable of generating workable diagnoses and solutions without expending considerable cognitive energies. For that reason, it also seems plausible to speak of collective action solutions "presenting themselves" to those individuals (or "coming into focus," or "emerging") *as if at a glance.* After all, regardless of who these knowers happen to be and what social positions they occupy, it is reasonable to expect that they will remember witnessing other people working together to solve similar problems, or perhaps have participated in comparable actions themselves, building relevant skills, habits and confidence in the process.

Whether from experiences gleaned through spectatorial or participant perspectives, many individuals "come equipped," if you will, with the skills, habits and epistemic resources required to "see through" to workable collective action solutions in situations such as these. Indeed, problem-solving activities of these sorts are, for many of us, a matter of *routine* for which we are, by and large, adequately prepared. We can generally rely on one another to be (or become) capable of working through such activities on our own, and it may even be reasonable to expect considerable trans-historical and cross-cultural convergence in the kinds of solutions we end up generating and enacting as individuals.

For these reasons, epistemological individualism seems relatively unproblematic in the context of small-scale collective action problems featuring, say, stranglers on subways and children on runaway rafts. However, it seems much more problematic when we are confronted with a complex, global problem of the likes of climate change, which arguably cannot be adequately diagnosed, let alone remedied, when considered in isolation from various other economic, social and political problems, some of which (e.g. community food and water insecurity, ethnic conflicts, and increasing militarized police forces) may well be exacerbated by climate-induced ecological variations. The unprecedented nature of the challenges climate change poses to communities and societies worldwide, and the essentially contestable, political dimensions of proposed diagnoses and solutions, ensures that responding collectively is hardly a matter of routine problem-solving for which individuals, groups and organizations are, by and large, adequately prepared. Individual knowers, in all of our ecological and social situatedness, simply cannot begin to understand the nature and scope of climate-related challenges in the absence of relationships built on foundations of critically reflexive trust and accountability across diverse and often conflicting epistemic communities, not to mention reliance on the testimony of many others, lay and expert alike (Grasswick 2014). Indeed, it is sheer arrogance to suppose that we could. My first concern, then, is that the knowledge condition instills or reinforces the unreasonable expectation that we, as individual knowers, are capable of discerning the nature of complex problems and possible solutions *all on our own*, from wherever we happen to be standing, irrespective of our social identities and locations and how such factors bear on our differential vulnerabilities and capacities for responding in concert with others.

3.2. Sets Unreasonably Demanding Epistemic Standard

In taking epistemological individualism for granted, the knowledge condition also sets an unreasonably demanding epistemic standard for individual knowers in the context of problems that are, quite unlike small-scale bystander scenarios, largely *structural* in character. In such contexts the focal concern is not merely with isolated *incidents* of harm with easily identifiable perpetrators (as is the case with stranglers on the subway, for instance). Here it is reasonable to expect individuals

to generate relatively clear collective action solutions, especially those who have considerable experience addressing similar problems and for whom doing so is a matter of routine. By way of contrast, in the context of climate change the concern is with persistent *patterns* of harm, including systemic group-based harms and their interconnections with climate-induced ecological variations, both of which implicate the actions of agents and agencies at multiple levels of human organization[4] operating against a set of structural background conditions that are historically contingent, more or less stable and also subject to further revision. When we are confronted with a structural problem of the magnitude and complexity of climate change—which is, as Chris Cuomo stresses, "a matter of global social justice" (Cuomo 2011, 693)—it would be awfully strange to expect there to be a "clear mapping" of collective or individual obligation onto our respective situations, much less a *single* collective action participation in which would "solve" the problem in question. Indeed, it may not *ever* be entirely clear what courses of collective action are required on whose parts, or which roles various individuals, groups and institutions may be called upon to assume and when. Intolerance for uncertainty in this context is for those who are willing to rest content with practical paralysis, and who seem not to recognize such a stance as a luxury unaffordable to many.

The knowledge condition obscures the fact that there is much than can be accomplished collectively in situations where it is unreasonable to expect the emergence of a way forward that is perfectly "clear" to and "clearly favorable" for all parties involved. Contrary to what the knowledge condition implies, addressing especially complex ecological and social problems requires sustained involvement on the part of various agents and agencies spanning decades, in addition to long-term coordination, planning and strategizing at multiple levels of organization and across multiple arenas and sites. As circumstances are continually changing and unforeseen challenges inevitably emerge in the wake of actions undertaken by particular groups, organizations and institutions, engaging in collective reflection and adjustment are also crucial to any such process. To expect awareness of a clear collective action solution—especially *in advance* of working together with others to begin analyzing, diagnosing and taking action to address specific aspects of such a problem (e.g. ongoing resource extraction on unceded and treaty-protected indigenous territories; outdated energy and transportation infrastructure premised on continued dependence on coal and oil; market economies designed to associate self-worth with increasing consumption of carbon-intensive food, clothing and technologies; and so on)—is to expect more than can reasonably be hoped for. It is also to preclude engagement in ongoing processes of *collective inquiry* that hold the promise of *revealing* things to us about our world, our relations, and ourselves —"things that we previously didn't or couldn't know," as longtime organizer, writer, educator, and scholar Chris Dixon stresses (Dixon 2014, 61)—*producing* practically relevant knowledge and enabling the development of capacities and skills we could not otherwise have acquired from the sidelines. To expect awareness of a clear collective action solution before taking action with others is to rest content with waiting around for sudden flashes of insight that depend on what we already

know, think we know and are currently capable of knowing as individuals—flashes that are unlikely ever to come.

3.3. *Lends Support to Response Skepticism*

Lorraine Code's recent work focuses on the "manufacture" of doubt and denial in relation to the physical phenomenon of climate change (Code 2013a, 2013b). Code reminds us that climate change skeptics "stand in a starkly oppositional relationship to ecological thinking," as well as "to larger commitments to environmental sustainability, and to assumptions about subjectivity and politics (and ethics) of knowledge that inform these modes of thought" (Code 2013a, 841; see also 2006). As Code observes, ongoing efforts to promote and maintain a body of social ignorance concerning the causes, consequences and beneficiaries of ecologically and socially destructive thought and practice still trade on the margins of fallibility and uncertainty which are to be expected of scientific inquiry, but which are commonly held up, instead, as evidence of a lack of sufficient "proof" of the anthropogenic drivers of climate change and as warranting doubt regarding existing scientific consensus. Whereas recent years have seen the emergence of detailed documentation of the role of corporate campaigns in promoting skepticism by generating misunderstandings of climate change (Hoggan 2009; Jacques 2009; Oreskes & Conway 2010), Code draws our attention to some of the more deeply entrenched ethical-epistemological commitments which seem to enable their effectiveness. She writes:

> A powerful force of resistance to acknowledging the ecological implications of climate change is a stubborn commitment in late twentieth and early twenty-first century western/northern capitalist societies and mainstream Anglo-American philosophy to a sovereign individualism: a commitment manifested by knowers and doers who, it seems, have no sex, no place, and no personal allegiances in any ontologically self-constituting or self-sustaining way. (Code 2013b, 74)

With these thoughts in mind, I want to raise a parallel concern about the manufacture of ecologically and socially destructive skepticism. My concern is that the knowledge condition lends support to a distinct though closely related form of climate change skepticism, sometimes called "response skepticism" (Capstick and Pidgeon 2014). *Response skepticism*, as I refer to it here, is a complex ensemble of affective-cognitive attitudes directed to the perceived meaningfulness and expected efficacy of actual and imaginable modes of collective response. In other words, it involves expressions of doubt or incredulity about the value of any proposed actions to address climate change, rather than skepticism about the existence of the physical phenomenon of climate change itself, or about the character of the threats it poses to societies and communities worldwide. Indeed, as Stuart Capstick and Nicholas Pidgeon observe, response skepticism "presumes there is a problem in the first place" (2014, 398).

By making awareness of a clear and definitive collective action solution a prerequisite for moral responsibility, my suspicion is that the knowledge condition

opens the door to what are likely to be *unending* invocations of doubt and complaints of unclarity as grounds for morally justifying collective inaction with respect to climate change. Given the inevitable persistence of disagreement, questioning and uncertainty in deliberations over any potential mode of response, individuals can always cry foul ("the solution has not come into focus …"), effectively undercutting the moral force of the approach ("… so we are not yet responsible for acting collectively"). Ironically, then, the picture of responsibility emerging from recent conversation may well help to generate and sustain the very sort of collective inaction it was ostensibly meant to challenge and overcome. Wielded as it so commonly is to abdicate responsibility by deflecting and defusing criticism, the malign response skepticism described here serves as a persistent obstacle to creating and reproducing more collaborative and collective modes of engagement, particularly (though not exclusively) in wealthy, predominantly white segments of western/northern capitalist societies. While often masquerading as an epistemically responsible posture rooted in the personal virtues of humility, circumspection and cautiousness, I suggest it is best understood as a device for rationalizing inaction and for reinforcing epistemic passivity and isolation among individuals and groups.

In summary, the assumptions undergirding the knowledge condition encourage us to imagine acting collectively to address complex problems as a rare and fleeting occurrence—something we are obligated to do only under the most stringent of conditions, and only briefly, in single actions, before returning to our solitary lives. Although we are occasionally obligated to coordinate our actions with others in the service of social goods, it is only once we, as individuals, have independently become aware of solutions to problems the shapes of which have been mysteriously determined in advance. Problems not fitting this mold are simply not our business. How, after all, could any of us figure out clear solutions for them, let alone our roles in solving them, all on our own? Indeed, underlying the knowledge condition is a certain reluctance or inability to imagine that ordinary people are capable of collaboratively and collectively analyzing the problems confronting them; of generating working, revisable strategies for addressing those problems; and of developing new questions, ideas, practices and ways of relating in and through processes of acting and reflecting together over time. Thus, the possibility that collective action is not only a product of, but oftentimes *produces* knowledge falls by the wayside, and the dynamics of knowledge production within and among groups, organizations and movements is left unexplored.

More worrisome, still, the assumptions undergirding the knowledge condition serve to reinforce already prevalent cultural denials of the complex webs of ecological and social relations that are constitutive of our very being. The oft-repeated suggestion that citizens of western/northern capitalist societies are basically self-sufficient individuals who only sometimes need to learn to get along with "random" strangers obscures the manifold relationships and interdependencies already connecting and sustaining, enabling and constraining every one of us in our evolving capacities as actors and knowers. In so doing, it not only covers over the extent to

which we are always already collaborating with many others near and far—even when we feel as though we are not, or do not think of ourselves as doing so—but also helps to encourage the reproduction of profoundly alienating, ecologically and socially dysfunctional relations and collaborations, including all of those social practices through which many of us continue to express our dependence on excessive consumption of fossil fuels. By challenging the knowledge condition and proposing an alternative approach to thinking about collective responsibility, I also hope to make plain that our existence within and among communities, networks, groups and institutions of various kinds and degrees of organization is an already present reality that needs to be engaged more productively, not an aspiration to be achieved, under certain conditions only.[5]

4. Responsibility for Collective Action and Collective Inquiry

Troubling as the knowledge condition is, critical engagement with it can be put to use in generating an alternative approach to thinking about collective responsibility. How, then, might we rethink the circumstances under which we bear responsibility for participating in collective action? As Iris Marion Young's social connection model of responsibility makes clear, whoever "we" happen to be, we all share responsibility for working to remedy the structural injustices shaping our individual and collective lives, owing to our (intentional or unintentional) participation in social practices that produce unjust outcomes (Young 2006, 102, 103; see also 2011). According to this alternative model, "obligations of justice arise between persons by virtue of the social processes that connect them," which include such social practices as are involved in energy-intensive cycles of resource extraction, production, consumption and waste in western/northern capitalist societies (2006, 201). However, Young is careful to note that obligations of justice arise whether the social processes connecting us happen to be taking place within or extending across national boundaries, adding that "political institutions are the response to these obligations rather than their basis" (102). Hence, the fact that a particular set of political institutions persistently refuses to take responsibility for addressing a given manifestation of structural injustice—such as differential responsiveness on the part of government agencies to climate-related emergency situations, which are notoriously shaped by class and race[6]—does not absolve agents of other types of their shared responsibility to work toward remedying that injustice, even when those other agents may not have been the principal contributors to the regrettable outcome and have played no part in creating the background conditions that produced it. As Young explains:

> Our responsibility derives from belonging together with others in a system of interdependent processes of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize projects. Even though we cannot trace the outcome we may regret to our own particular actions in a direct causal chain, we bear responsibility because we are part of the process. (2006, 118)

The kind of responsibility we bear is forward-looking and political in character, where "politics" is to be understood in terms of "public communicative engagement with others for the sake of organizing our relationships and coordinating our actions more justly" (123). Thus, we may share responsibility for drawing others' attention to a particular manifestation of climate-related structural injustice; for persuading others that inequitable treatment of communities in emergency situations is unacceptable; and for enjoining others to participate in collective action aimed at altering prevailing institutional rules and priorities to prevent the recurrence of such treatment.

From the perspective of the social connection model, then, awareness of clear and definitive collective action solutions is by no means a *prerequisite* for our holding ourselves and others responsible for working collectively to begin addressing structural problems. Not only are clear solutions not always readily available to individuals, groups and organizations,[7] but it would also be a mistake to assume that everyone shares similar capacities, skills and epistemic resources and has nothing left to learn from differently situated and experienced others, especially those who are most directly and severely affected by the problems in question and are already mobilizing in response (i.e., frontline communities; see Moore and Russell 2011). Contra the knowledge condition, then, my proposal is that in many contexts of structural injustice *we share responsibility for acting together in spite of our shared not knowing how to go on*. Indeed, as Ami Harbin argues, working collectively to address structural injustice "may very often be disorienting" (Harbin 2014, 162). Striving to act more responsibly with others in the midst of the ongoing domination of lands and of peoples will sometimes mean inhabiting persistent feelings of corporeal, affective and cognitive unsettlement, and continuing to move forward in spite of them, rather than recoiling from experiences we find discomforting and even overwhelming (Harbin 2012, 2014).

Saying that we share responsibility for acting together in spite of our shared not knowing how to go on is not, of course, a counsel or celebration of ignorance —quite the contrary. Sharing such responsibility entails sharing the further responsibility to engage in ongoing processes of *collective inquiry*, which may well result in reforming and transforming our currently operative epistemic resources. That is, as social actors we share responsibility for generating and continually refining our analyses of structural problems through ongoing process of collective learning, which include reflecting on and drawing lessons from actions undertaken with or by others. Oddly enough, the question of whether a random collection of individuals can ever be held *morally* responsible for not, say, jointly inquiring, listening, crediting, discussing, trusting, critiquing and pursuing understanding of problems over time has been treated as entirely separate from the question of whether such a group can be held responsible for not acting together—as though "thinking" and "communicating" belonged in entirely different categories than "acting." But these are precisely the sorts of joint epistemic activities that are called for in unacceptable circumstances where clear "solutions" are not in the offing, and where relatively few people are yet involved in anything resembling collective action.

Although engaging in such activities will not, of course, remedy structural problems in and of themselves, José Medina argues that resistant acts of communicating and thinking together are "*not in vain*" (Medina 2013, 227). First of all, "resistant acts of this sort break down the complicity of the agents in question and thus result in the melioration of their moral characters"; and, second, "the way in which these resistant acts disrupt complicity and challenge complacent attitudes shows a performative move in a different direction, which has the potential to open up new possibilities of action" (227, 228). Through his explorations of several relevant and illuminating historical examples (including the collective history of Rosa Parks' involvement in catalyzing the Civil Rights Movement), Medina offers an approach to thinking through the epistemic dimensions of collective inaction that directly enacts the taking up of multivalent responsibilities.

Why exactly do we share responsibility for participating in processes of collective inquiry? Most importantly, and as mentioned above, because attempting to discern the nature of a structural problem and possible solutions on our own is an inherently limited undertaking in all but the simplest of cases. I shall offer four related considerations here.

4.1. Correcting and Counteracting Individuals' Epistemic Flaws

First, it may well be a mistake to take for granted our own and others' "epistemic innocence." As Medina explains:

> Assuming that ordinary subjects in ordinary circumstances can remain unaffected by long-held and prevailing prejudices would be to assume that people can remain *epistemically innocent* even when they live their lives in contexts of oppression, that is, even when they are brought up and operate amid systemic injustices. (2013, 130)

If indicators of ecological and social injustice are "prima facie counter-evidence against the default status of epistemic competence that could otherwise be attached to apparently responsible agents" (130), then there is good reason to be suspicious of the idea that suitably nuanced collective action strategies can typically be read directly off a given situation by a group of complete strangers, utilizing their own epistemic resources and the problem-solving activities they consider routine. What solutions seem "clear" and "clearly favorable" to agents whose cognitive skills, habits and epistemic resources have been shaped in and through their everyday participation in interconnected systems of oppression may very well serve to perpetuate those same systems, often unbeknownst to the agents themselves. To assume epistemic innocence, then, may be to risk reinforcing or merely shifting prevailing patterns of harm in the name of addressing an immediately pressing concern. So, processes of collective inquiry might be required in order to begin correcting and counteracting individuals' epistemic flaws (e.g. false beliefs, distorting interpretive frameworks and hermeneutical gaps—see Fricker 2007; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Dotson 2011, 2014).

4.2. Ensuring Group Behavior Reflects Shared Beliefs and Values

Second, the epistemic resources upon which we rely as individuals may well be *insufficient* for or even *inadequate* to the tasks of accurately and faithfully diagnosing and elaborating possible solutions to the structural problems confronting us. Kristie Dotson's recent (2014) work is particularly helpful in shedding light on different types of change that individuals and groups may need to undergo when engaging in ongoing processes of collective problem-solving, particularly when responding to unfamiliar or even unprecedented problems. *First-order changes* are prompted when a group comes to recognize that their collective behavior does not reflect their shared beliefs and values, such that there is a noticeable *inefficiency* in their behavior. In environmental policy, education and social psychology literatures, where the focus is typically on individuals, this phenomenon is sometimes called the "value-action gap" (Blake 1999; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; APA 2009), though similar phenomena have also been observed in agents and collections of other types.[8] A desire for first-order change "does not call for revisions in beliefs and values specifically" (Dotson 2014, 118). Rather, it calls for alterations in strategies or approaches to problem-solving, and for increased efforts to bring behavior in line with operative beliefs and values, often by working to reorient entrenched cognitive habits through "single-loop processes" (118). So, processes of collective inquiry might be required in order to ensure that a group's collective behavior comes to reflect their shared beliefs and values.

4.3. Ensuring Necessary Shifts in Operative Values and Epistemic Resources

Third, in some cases individuals and groups may come to appreciate that it is not only their *behavior* that stands in the way of more effectively addressing a problem, but the shared *epistemic resources* upon which they have come to rely. *Second-order changes* are prompted when a group recognizes that the shared epistemic resources upon which they have come to rely "are insufficient in some way" given their goals (Dotson 2014, 118). For example, many people living in western/northern capitalist societies have grown accustomed to the individualization of responsibility for addressing climate change, largely in response to campaigns led by environmentalists, government agencies and corporations who have been pushing the idea that changing lightbulbs, eating less meat, riding bikes and planting trees are particularly effective ways of slowing climate change. Thus, many people living in these contexts tend to focus on private-sphere mitigation efforts both individually and collectively, and also believe that such efforts make the best use of their time, energy and resources. However, as Chris Cuomo points out, should the vast majority of individuals and households the world over manage to drastically reduce their respective privately controlled emissions, their collective efforts would still be insufficient for adequate mitigation. Cuomo dubs this the "insufficiency problem" (Cuomo 2011, 701).[9]

Second order changes might occur when, for example, a loosely structured group whose members independently surmise that they could amplify their efforts by working together ("*we* could support one another in reducing our use of oil by carpooling"), and hence find greater clarity concerning what each is responsible for doing as an individual ("*I'd* better offer to drive on Mondays and Tuesdays"), later come to appreciate that, important though such efforts may be, there are likely more effective ways of leveraging their collective power and resources.[10] The group may come to realize that the strategies for addressing climate change that have been marketed to people like them—and the middle-class values that tend to make such strategies seem "obvious" and attractive—are geared more so to opening markets for so-called "green consumers" than they are to dealing honestly with the complexities of reducing the harms of climate change impacts.

Given that citizens inhabiting particularly wealthy segments of western/northern capitalist societies are privileged both materially and with respect to their shared insufficient epistemic resources (insofar as they may find such resources "well fitted to [their] own experiences and understandings of the world"), such privilege "must be grappled with as a major source of inertia" (129). Grappling with the insufficiency of private-sphere mitigation efforts may well prove quite difficult for those who have come to think of themselves and their neighbors as "good environmental citizens," and whose limited concept of *citizenship* precludes engagement in more meaningful and efficacious forms of collective action. In order to collectively undergo such a shift in vision and mandate, a group must be prepared to work through "double-loop processes," which require a willingness to undergo alterations in operative values and to allow certain elements of their shared epistemic resources to be "phased out" as others are "phased in" (Dotson 2014, 118). So, processes of collective inquiry might be required in order to ensure that necessary shifts in operative values and epistemic resources take place.

4.4. Identifying, Altering and Transcending Operative Social Imaginaries

Fourth, individuals and groups need to contend with the possibility that it is not only certain of their shared *epistemic resources* that stand in the way of more effectively addressing a problem, but also certain elements of operative, *instituted social imaginaries* that inform and preserve those very resources. For example, many people living in western/northern capitalist societies have grown accustomed to envisioning the role of the "environmentally conscious citizen" as entailing a civic duty to vote for preferred candidates during election season and—when circumstances dictate—a further duty to join together to make specific demands of elected officials through exercises of public reason. Thus, many people living in these contexts have decided to devote less time and energy to private-sphere mitigation efforts and more to activism in the public sphere, at least where such spaces tend to remain open. The focus of their activism tends to center on lobbying for such measures as carbon taxes, cap-and-trade agreements and regulatory policies that

only governments agencies have the authority to enact, confident in their belief that such efforts make the best use of their time, energy and resources. However, it is not uncommon for citizens who adhere exclusively to a "politics of demand" to find their efforts continually frustrated by more powerful industrial lobbyists, as well as by the irresponsiveness of government officials who seem more concerned with giving tax-breaks to corporate "job creators" than with protecting the lives and well-being of would-be employees and their fellow citizens, not to mention the fragile ecologies of the landscapes they and future generations will collectively inhabit.

It may gradually dawn on citizens such as these that the entrenched power of industrial lobbyists and irresponsiveness of government officials might actually be important dimensions of the structural problems they have been confronting (rather than, say, benign features of a well-functioning polis). It may also occur to them that their expectations of one another *qua* citizens and human beings have quite possibly been shaped, in part, by some of the very same institutions they are increasingly coming to recognize as among their intransigent opposition. With suspicions of these sorts in mind, these citizens may come to recognize the need for progressively more radical changes in the epistemic resources upon which they have come to rely, above and beyond the first- and second-order changes they have already been enacting. *Third-order changes* are prompted when a group discovers that their shared epistemic resources are not only insufficient, but also *inadequate* in some way given their goals. In a third-order change, a group's ability to recognize the broader traditions of thought and practice which generate and maintain their shared epistemic resources "can aid in producing an instituting social imaginary capable of altering one's entire epistemological system" (Dotson 2014, 119).

In order to shift collectively towards engaging in the "critical-creative action of a society that exhibits its autonomy in its capacity to put itself in question" (Code 2006, 164), a group's members must be prepared to work through "triple-loop processes" that enable them to recognize, in the words of Lorraine Code,

> normative social meanings, customs, expectations, assumptions, values, prohibitions, and permissions—the habitus and ethos—into which human beings are nurtured from childhood and which they internalize, affirm, challenge, or contest as they make sense of their place, options, responsibilities within a world, both social and physical, whose "nature" and meaning are also instituted in these imaginary significations. (30)

As Dotson points out, however, such efforts to "take a step back" and become aware of one's overall epistemological system can be "extraordinarily difficult": "It is like experiencing the impossible as possible and, correspondingly, viewing the limits of one's epistemological systems that designate the possible as impossible" (2014, 131). For example, a group of citizens may have hitherto found the possibility of channeling their collective efforts into creating alternative and counter-institutions[11] virtually *unthinkable*, for they have been unable to imagine a world in which ordinary people are capable of *collective self-determination*—that is, of deciding "their own

destinies free from any external compulsion or interference from other human groups," while providing "the cultural, social, economic and political relations needed for its members to pursue good lives" (Whyte, forthcoming).

Dotson emphasizes that being able to make the step of coming to grips with the limitations of one's own epistemological system is "difficult enough"; actually altering or transcending those limitations "may be impossible for many" (2014, 132). Nevertheless, I want to suggest that an openness to pursuing and undergoing third-order changes is a basic requirement of responsibly working together to address structural problems of the magnitude and complexity of climate change. Indeed, when there is good reason to expect that a problem will present unforeseen challenges, as well as challenges for which individuals, groups and organizations are simply not well equipped or prepared, groups of knowers must not only be willing to work through triple-loop processes together, but must also actively seek out, rub up against and come to terms with alternative social imaginaries so as to ward off the possibility of getting stuck in epistemic and practical ruts—caught up in what Medina calls "meta-blindness"[12] (Medina 2013, 75). So, processes of collective inquiry might be required in order to identify the social imaginaries that are (and are not) standing in the way of groups and communities developing more adequate epistemic resources (e.g. better understandings of what it means to be a citizen, or human being).

Conclusion

In the midst of acting together to address deeply entrenched ecological and social injustices there is a need to engage constantly with external and internal sources of "epistemic friction"[13] (Medina 2013, Chap. 1, 2), enacting single, double- and even triple-loop processes for reforming and transforming our epistemological systems in response to the demands of our economic, social and political circumstances. Instead of acting as though an absence of clear solutions absolves us of responsibility for participating in collective action, loosely structured groups might take their shared "not knowing" the precise nature of structural problems and possible ways of responding as a starting point for generating provisional, working diagnoses; for building their individual and collective problem-solving capacities together; and for striving to get ahead of those capacities' limitations all the while, recognizing that there will always be other ways of approaching the problems confronting them.

Yet engaging in processes of collective inquiry presents its own challenges, which may well demand shifts in sensibilities and ways of relating. Recognizing that communicating across differences is especially challenging in the context of interconnected systems of oppression, one of the central aims of Medina's work is "the improvement of social relationality and of the communication among social agents and social groups, so that relations of solidarity become possible and increasing degrees of lucidity can be achieved by individuals and groups" (Medina

2013, 248). "In order to overcome situations of oppression," he writes, "we need to transform the polis and its citizens simultaneously, and in multiple ways; we need to change their ethical, their political, and their epistemic ways of relating" (85). Partly to enable such shifts in sensibilities and ways of relating, people need spaces where they can talk openly and honestly with one another, think through their experiences and needs together, establish connections across diverse social experiences and lives, and develop caring, respectful relationships even in the midst of persistent and profound disagreements. We need to come to see one another as people we can learn from and as collaborators in a process of continual development, whose differing social experiences and perspectives are invaluable sources of epistemic friction, challenging our unself-conscious assumptions and entrenched habits of listening, speaking, seeing and reasoning. Shared analyses of problems tend to emerge through the exchange of ideas and the collective creation of new ones, through negotiations and reframings of disagreements, and as trust is forged over the course of continually showing up, taking initiative and following through together.

So too do more meaningful and effective courses of collective action—or so I will suggest in closing. Perhaps what future conversations concerning collective inaction need, then, is a lot less hoping for sudden bursts of clarity, and far more sustained, everyday engagement with truly transformative sources of friction.

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Notes

[1]   I am taking the liberty of naming this case, alongside all others cited in this paper, for ease of reference.

[2]   In a way, Held prefigures a shift of this sort when she remarks, in passing, on the possible implications of her position for "political situations": "If a reasonable person judges that the overthrow of an existing political system is an action that is obviously called for, he may perhaps consider himself morally responsible for the failure of the random collection of which he is a member to perform this action. If he thinks some action to change an existing political system is obviously called for, but is not clear about which action, he may consider himself morally responsible for the failure of the random collection of which he is a member to perform the quite different action of transforming itself into a group capable of arriving at decisions on such questions" (1970, 480).

[3]   I understand *climate change impacts* in terms similar to Kyle Powys Whyte, who describes such effects as "arising based on the capacity of patterns of community relations to absorb

local ecological alterations stemming from climate change," which may be more or less disruptive insofar as they can be absorbed by existing structures of organization without those structures needing to change (Whyte 2014, 601).

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

[5] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to highlight the ontological implications of questioning epistemic individualism as I have done in Section 3.

[6] Consider, for example, the mixed responses of the EPA and FEMA in the wake of hurricane Katrina and superstorm Sandy (see Pulido 2000; Bullard 2008).

[7] Thus, as climate justice organizers Hilary Moore and Joshua Kahn Russell write, "our question isn't whether we can 'solve the climate crisis,' but *how do we navigate change? Will there be justice on the other side?* That is our work together. That is where we find vision and inspiration" (Moore and Russell 2011, 9). Furthermore: "we see our main challenge as finding ways to *navigate the multiple crises that are already changing our lives.* What we do next will determine the scale and the scope of our transition" (9).

[8] For example, political sociologist Ingolfur Blühdorn suggests that, "Trying to make sense of the evident contradiction between late-modern society's acknowledgement that radical and effective change is urgent and inescapable and its adamant resolve to sustain what is known to be unsustainable is a hugely important and difficult task" (2007, 272).

[9] Cuomo's recent work emphasizes the "rarely emphasized fact" that "household consumption and personal transportation account for a significant but minority slice of total greenhouse gas emissions worldwide," which is to say that, "Even if personal sphere reductions that can be directly controlled by individuals and households are ethically imperative, they are insufficient for adequate mitigation" (701).

[10] When Cuomo suggests that, "political activism, popular education, and effective coalitions may be even more important than private-sphere mitigation efforts such as reducing one's own carbon footprint" (2011, 707), I read her as calling for many concerned citizens and residents of industrialized western/northern capitalist societies to recognize that they are disempowered *as groups and communities*, and that their collective disempowerment is rooted, in part, in the consumerist values they continue to endorse in and through their daily activities. Thus, for the sake of greater collective self-empowerment, I also read Cuomo as calling for second-order changes in the outlooks of collectivities of various kinds and degrees of organization, especially those whose members may not be as familiar with or experienced in more self-conscious and intentional forms of political activism and organizing.

[11] For example, schools geared toward promoting ecological and social justice literacy and civic action while also serving needs for healthy, culturally-appropriate foods and social relations; cultural centers oriented toward preserving endangered languages and collective lifeways and creating new ones; alternative models of work and production that partly or wholly release people from dependence on wage labor and consumerism; and encampments established to prevent the incursion of extractive industries onto unceded and treaty-protected indigenous territories while also reconnecting people to lands and wilderness. For more on the differences between alternative and counter-institutions, see Cornell (2011).

[12] Medina characterizes *meta-blindness* (or *meta-insensitivity*) as "a special difficulty in realizing and appreciating the limitations of [one's] horizon of understanding" (Medina 2013, 75). As he explains further, "privileged subjects tend to be particularly reluctant to acknowledge the limitations of the horizon of understanding that they inhabit; that is,

they tend to be *blind to their own blindness*, numbed or insensitive to the cultural blind spots that they have inherited and they recirculate in their epistemic lives" (75).

[13]   Medina describes *epistemic friction* in terms of "the resistance of epistemic others" (Medina 2013, 56). He characterizes such friction as follows: "Alternative social imaginaries can serve as correctives of each other, epistemic counterpoints that enable people to see limitations of each viewpoint, creating beneficial epistemic friction. Alternative testimonial sensibilities can also serve as correctives of each other when they are objectively compared and contrasted, or when they are given a sufficiently unbiased space to engage with each other, yielding beneficial epistemic friction" (78).

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