CLIMATE LEGACY: A Newish Concept for the Climate Crisis

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Abstract: Individual and collective agents, especially affluent ones, are not doing nearly enough to prevent and prepare for the worst consequences of the unfolding climate crisis. This is, I suggest, partly because our existing conceptual repertoires are inadequate to the task of motivating climate-stabilizing activities. I argue that the concept CLIMATE LEGACY meets five desiderata for concepts that, through usage, have significant potential to motivate climate action. Contrasting CLIMATE LEGACY with CARBON FOOTPRINT, CLIMATE JUSTICE, and CARBON NEUTRALITY, I clarify some advantages of thinking in terms of the former. I conclude by discussing some climate legacy-enhancing practical proposals that merit consideration.

Keywords: climate, legacy, concepts, motivation, action, conceptual engineering

Many activists insist that we think and communicate about anthropogenic climate change as a *crisis* or *emergency* (Carrington 2019 and Zak 2019). Doing so emphasizes, repeatedly and often publicly, that climate change is a problem that requires *immediate* action and *extensive* social, economic, and political changes. We need more where that came from.

Likewise, many philosophers have recently embraced the study and practice of conceptual engineering: designing or revising concepts to better serve our theoretical, ethical, and practical aims (Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett 2020). Here I aim to do some conceptual engineering with the goal of helping to *motivate action* in response to the climate crisis. Thus, I promote a motivational turn in climate ethics, as Carol Booth (2009) has for conservation ethics.

In §1, I introduce five desiderata for *concepts* that, through our usage of them, have significant potential to help motivate climate-stabilizing *activities* (i.e., actions or omissions that contribute to climate change mitigation or adaptation). Such activities include individually or collectively: supporting politicians who prioritize climate-stabilization; drafting and lobbying for climate-stabilizing legislation; implementing emission reduction or carbon capture projects; divesting from fossil fuels and investing in other energy sources; limiting or delaying procreation; eschewing animal products; reducing travel and shipping; increasing energy efficiency; preparing for extreme weather; developing energy storage technology; minimizing use of disposable products; and encouraging others to do likewise. I call such concepts “climate-stabilizing concepts.” For brevity, I sometimes talk about concepts that motivate instead of using more accurate but awkward phrases like “concepts the *usage* of which can help motivate action.”

In §2, I introduce a concept, CLIMATE LEGACY,[[1]](#footnote-1) explaining why it meets all five desiderata. In §3, I reveal further advantages of using that concept by contrasting it with CARBON FOOTPRINT, CLIMATE JUSTICE, and CARBON NEUTRALITY. In §4, I suggest some policies and actions that could improve our individual and collective climate legacies by putting CLIMATE LEGACY to work.

1. Desiderata for Climate-Stabilizing Concepts

To cope with the climate crisis, speaking differently is not enough.[[2]](#footnote-2) To avoid, or at least adapt to its most serious negative consequences, we (individually and collectively) must take much more significant action than we have so far. Since agents’ actions are influenced by and depend on cognition, I suggest that we need changes in our very thought processes in order to motivate climate-stabilizing actions. That includes changing our conceptual repertoires and how we use the concepts in them.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hence, I undertake what Sally Haslanger (2006) calls an ameliorative project, which involves investigating why we have the concepts that we do, what purposes we want them to serve, and how to make them best serve those purposes. Addressing normative questions about which concepts we *should* *use* can enrich our conceptual resources, whether by adding concepts to, eliminating concepts from, or revising concepts in our repertoires.

Concepts are resources. Specifically, they are tools for thinking, and as with other activities, if we do not have, and more importantly, *use* the right tools, we are unlikely to achieve our goals. Yet, we habitually use concepts that do not adequately motivate agents to undertake climate-stabilizing activities.[[4]](#footnote-4) For example, the scientific concepts that we use to think about the climate are generally compatible with (and may even encourage) detachment and passivity; GREENHOUSE GAS and GLOBAL AVERAGE TEMPERATURE have no necessary or obvious connection to agency, moral duties or ideals, or even prudence. (Using other concepts, like DISCOUNT RATE, DOOM, CLEAN COAL, and UNCERTAINTY can even facilitate rationalization of climate inaction or delayed action). Some of those concepts are crucial for *understanding* the climate system, but sometimes other goals take priority over understanding. (For example, mass vaccination against COVID-19 is more important than mass understanding of exactly how mRNA vaccines work.)

It is a common mistake to think (or act as though) *if only* people understood climate science better, action would necessarily follow; scholars of climate communication call this the information (or knowledge) deficit model (Nisbet et al. 2018). But having scientific knowledge does not ensure that we are efficaciously motivated as we should be. Even having accurate moral beliefs is no guarantee of effective moral motivation; experts in moral psychology and metaethics generally agree on that much, despite ongoing debates about the link between moral judgment and motivation.[[5]](#footnote-5) Even if knowledge did reliably translate to action at the individual level, we also need collective climate action. Besides, waiting and hoping for a tipping point from increased knowledge to increased action has not worked all that well so far.

Since we are causally, *and morally*, responsible for the concepts that we possess and use (Fredericks 2018 and 2020), we need to start identifying which concepts we should be using more, or less, or differently, in order to motivate climate-stabilizing activities. The best concepts might not be the most familiar ones; we should be actively seeking and developing concepts to serve our purposes.

To count as climate-stabilizing, concepts must meet multiple desiderata. (The following list is not necessarily exhaustive.) First, and most obviously, climate-stabilizing concepts direct attention to (key aspects of) the climate crisis.

Second, climate-stabilizing concepts draw attention to climate change’s temporal and spatial dimensions. The causes and effects of increasing atmospheric greenhouse gases (GHGs) are widely dispersed in time and space, which is part of why the climate crisis is so difficult to address (Gardiner 2006). But many concepts used to contemplate climate change (like GREENHOUSE EFFECT and CARBON FOOTPRINT) do not make its extent in space and time particularly salient. One exception is ANTHROPOCENE, which evokes time’s passage on a geological scale. However, for that reason, it makes some people feel powerless, and thus that climate inaction is justified. Climate-stabilizing concepts reflect the spatially and temporally extended nature of climate change while encouraging action now.

Third, climate-stabilizing concepts make salient widely shared goals and collective agency, rather than being overly individualistic. That is a challenge, but even members of highly polarized communities share some goals. For instance, many types of people share a desire for their lives to have *meaning* (Steger et al. 2006). So, it is a good idea to seek out concepts that will help individuals and groups find meaning in climate-stabilizing activities and thus conceptualize the sacrifices involved as worthwhile (or not sacrifices at all). Associatively linking climate-stabilizing activities with things that are already considered sources of meaning (or other shared goals and co-benefits) would probably be particularly productive.

Fourth, climate-stabilizing concepts are somewhat familiar, and not overly technical or abstract, so that many agents in many contexts find them useful. Understanding them should not require specialist education, so it would be wise to identify familiar concepts that already have motivational force and adapt them to the climate crisis context. How can using a concept have motivational force? One way is by priming us to feel emotions, which tend to be more motivating than bare cognitions. For example, when both LIFE-SAVING and REVENUE-NEUTRAL are correctly applied to some policy, if using the former is more likely to cause agents to feel enthusiasm for it rather than nothing, then that concept would have greater motivational force.

Fifth, usage of climate-stabilizing concepts is especially motivating to agents of particular kinds, namely: (i) the greatest causal contributors to and greatest beneficiaries of anthropogenic climate change; (ii) those with the material means and/or social capital to mitigate and facilitate adaptation to it; (iii) those most in need of convincing that it is a crisis; and (iv) those who constitute the biggest obstacle to large-scale change.

Generally, those who satisfy (i), (ii), and, to a lesser extent, (iii) and (iv) are wealthy individuals and groups(measured by *global* standards). Those lacking in resources have neither been the greatest causal contributors to nor the greatest beneficiaries of climate-changing energy expenditures. Nor do under-resourced agents have the material means or social capital necessary for significant climate action.[[6]](#footnote-6) So, it is a high priority to motivate lots of wealthy and middle-class agents to undertake climate-stabilizing activities.

Similarly, the best climate-stabilizing concepts will motivate older generations, who also disproportionately satisfy (i)-(iv). First, older generations have done more to *cause* and *benefit* from climate-altering emissions than young people, so they bear greater *responsibility* for the crisis. Second, they tend to have more money and power, and thus a greater *ability* to have a positive impact. Third, they often *need more convincing* that climate change is a crisis: for example, “older adults are more likely than are younger adults to believe there is no scientific consensus” about climate change (McCright and Dunlap 2011, 1171 and see also Funk and Tyson 2020). Hence, older generations are also more likely to *obstruct* large-scale social change.

Finally, climate-stabilizing concepts should motivate political conservatives. For we need political and institutional change to stabilize the climate. And presently, in the U.S., the biggest obstacle to change is resistance from political conservatives, who disproportionately satisfy (iii) and (iv), denying that anthropogenic climate change is a crisis, and functioning as obstacles to treating it as one.[[7]](#footnote-7) (*Some* who consider it a hoax may be impervious to contrary evidence[[8]](#footnote-8) and will not undertake climate-stabilizing activities *as such*, but might do so to advance other goals.)

But increasingly, rejection of climate science is not the biggest obstacle to action. Increasingly, political conservatives, especially younger ones, accept the scientific consensus and accept that people (and economies!) are being and will be harmed by anthropogenic climate change (Funk and Kennedy 2020). The more significant obstacles now are the rates at which conservatives (a) deny that that we can do anything about the climate crisis, (b) deny that public institutions should play a (significant) role in confronting it, or (c) trust in the miraculous power of an unspecified technological advancement to save us at some unspecified future time (see Funk and Tyson 2020, Kennedy and Johnson 2020, and Withers 2020). Given democratic ideals and the problem’s enormity, it would be wrong not to seek conservative support for the necessary large-scale changes. So, we must try to understand conservatives’ values and communicate about the climate crisis in ways that resonate with those values.

So, let me summarize the key desiderata for concepts with significant potential to motivate climate-stabilizing activities. Such concepts:

1. Direct attention to the climate crisis,
2. Reflect its extended spatial and temporal dimensions, while emphasizing the need for immediate action,
3. Make salient widely shared goals, agency, and the need for collaborative action,
4. Are somewhat familiar, not overly technical or abstract, and
5. When put to use, motivate as many agents as possible, especially wealthier, older, and politically conservative ones.

Desiderata (a) and (b) concern *what* kind of problem demands action, (c) and (d) concern *why* using the concepts can be expected to motivate agents, and (e) concerns *who* needs motivating.

1. CLIMATE LEGACY

One concept that makes large timescales salient, is already familiar, emphasizes interpersonal and intergroup relations, and already seems to motivate agents, including (and maybe especially) wealthier, older, and conservative agents, is the concept of a legacy.

Legacies are widely understood as bundles of material resources amassed by one or more members of one or more generations and bequeathed to later generations, often within a family, but sometimes along other lines. Trust funds are prime examples of material legacies. But legacies can be non-material, like sets of accomplishments that confer social status or the basis of self-respect on groups over time. For example, early hip-hop artists’ achievements are one part of the remarkable creative legacy that African Americans have given future generations.

It is plausible to suppose that many agents can be motivated to act by contemplating their legacies. To reflect on the motivational force of LEGACY, consider how many parents want to and work hard to leave their children some sort of legacy, whether a house, an investment portfolio, a set of skills or cultural practices, a beloved homeland, or something else. Many different factors influence the type of legacy that one aims to leave, but striving to fulfill the desire to leave one (even when doing so requires significant sacrifice) is part of what makes parenthood so meaningful for many people.

Of course, people without children also often seek to leave a legacy, whether to specifiable individuals or groups, humanity, or the whole biosphere. Researchers seek to leave legacies of knowledge for younger scholars and the public. Public figures often seek to leave legacies of accomplishments recorded in history books. Artists seek to leave legacies of creative works for future generations to cherish. Doctors, engineers, teachers, carpenters, farmers, judges, and many others often seek to leave legacies by making skilled contributions to the public good and to individuals’ thriving. Organizations of various kinds also seek to leave legacies through their collective efforts. Internet searches for “legacy quotes” return many examples, from a diverse range of sources, emphasizing the importance, value, and motivational power of legacies.

Concerns about legacies seem to be fairly motivating to many middle-class and wealthy people, since they often bequeath material resources to others, which requires foregoing some consumption for themselves.[[9]](#footnote-9) Wealthier people can afford to contemplate and save for the distant future to a degree that others cannot (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). Plus, many wealthier people intentionally aim to amass material legacies to solidify their high social status. Groups are also motivated to seek lasting status; the Human Rights Campaign’s many uses of the phrase “the right side of history” is evidence that the organization acts with their long-term legacy in mind (and also encourages supporters to do so). Conservatives like Ronald Reagan and Ben Shapiro have also invoked the “ash-heap of history” and “right side of history” to disparage outgroups and motivate ingroup members to participate in perpetuating a certain kind of legacy.

Legacies are, by definition, temporally extended. They generally take significant time (and effort) to amass. And preserving extant legacies is often a relatively high priority.[[10]](#footnote-10) So, conceptualizing something as a legacy represents it as persisting throughout an extended period of time, usually across multiple generations, if not in perpetuity. Legacies are also interpersonal. Regarding something as a legacy involves representing it as linking giver(s) and receiver(s) and generally represents it in an aspirational light: as something to pursue or to be grateful for and take pride in (and thus to protect).

But using LEGACY as people have been doing for generations cannot be expected to generate climate action; it has no necessary connection to the climate crisis, and its usefulness is independent of the crisis. However, expanding our conceptual repertoires to include CLIMATE LEGACY and making good use of this new, more specialized concept has the potential to fill a void in how we think about and thus act in response to the climate crisis.[[11]](#footnote-11)

So, what is a climate legacy? From a quantificational perspective, I envision an individual’s or group’s climate legacy as either (1) the net GHG emissions for which they are (wholly or partially) casually responsible over their lifetime or existence, (2) the net GHG emissions from which they benefitted throughout their lifetime or existence, or else (3) the sum of those. But another option is to understand climate legacies as (4) unquantifiable cultural artifacts.[[12]](#footnote-12) For instance, a climate legacy might be understood as an agent’s contributions to creating a culture that values low-emission lifestyles and represents emissions’ *meaning* in a new way (not as necessary but regrettable by-products of perfectly acceptable activities, but perhaps as poisonous, physical manifestations of disrespect for living beings, present and future, which should be heavily taxed and socially discouraged). I say more about those options in §4.

Regardless of whether we prefer (1), (2), (3), or (4), CLIMATE LEGACY meets the five previously identified desiderata. First, regarding (a), by qualifying LEGACY with CLIMATE, we certainly direct attention to the climate crisis.

Regarding (b), CLIMATE LEGACY reflects the intergenerational, temporally extended nature of climate change, while also indicating that leaving a good legacy requires action now. For insofar as we wait to save money, pursue our ambitions for non-material goods, or reduce our emissions, leaving an admirable legacy becomes increasingly difficult and eventually impossible. Just as the power of compound interest incentivizes investing early, compounding climatic disruptions are a reason to act now. Plus, since legators and legatees can be widely distributed in space, using CLIMATE LEGACY is at least compatible with global-scale thinking.

Regarding (c), CLIMATE LEGACY can make widely shared goals salient, insofar as things like positively impacting future generations and earning a good reputation are widely shared goals. CLIMATE LEGACY can also be associatively linked with a meaningful life, since many people already (often unconsciously) think of legacies as a way to achieve a sort of immortality despite their biological limitations, and understand their life’s meaning as intimately connected with their legacy (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 1999). Legacies also help situate people within a social context, as members of a larger group, and the positive emotions and sense of belonging that come from social inclusion are highly motivating to many people. Thus, by regularly thinking and communicating about *climate* legacies, people might come to believe that a good climate legacy is an important component of a meaningful life, one that grounds both self-respect and a good reputation (at least in the Anthropocene).

Regarding (d), CLIMATE LEGACY is a complex of two concepts that are already widely familiar. So, it is not a particularly technical concept (though quantifying climate legacies will require considerable expertise). Admittedly, thinking about climate legacies requires *some* abstraction, since we cannot see or touch them, but given the scale of the crisis, we cannot entirely avoid abstraction in conceptualizing it.

Finally, regarding (e), there is limited empirical data about how legacy motives differ across demographic categories. However, research by Newton et al. indicates that “a focus on legacy tends to develop with increasing age” (2014, 66 and see also Zacher, Rosing, and Frese 2011). And certainly, the desire to leave a legacy motivates *many* people, including (and maybe especially) relatively wealthy people. Furthermore, experimental research by Zaval, Markovitz, and Weber indicates that “priming legacy motives increased donations to an environmental charity, proenvironmental intentions, and climate-change beliefs” (2015, 231) and that “Legacy motives alone accounted for a greater proportion of the variance in behavioral intention (.081) compared to whether someone identified politically as a Democrat versus an Independent or a Republican (.028)” (2015, 233).

Moreover, political conservatives, insofar as they are (by definition) more concerned about *conserving* (certain) traditions than liberals, can be expected to be at least as, or more, motivated to leave good legacies. Legacy concerns clearly motivate many conservatives I know. This may be a function of common conservative ideas about families. For legacies are generally understood as family affairs: their intended purpose is often to preserve certain family values, practices, and identities over time. So, familiar types of legacies often function to prevent the drastic or sudden changes that conservatives dislike and instead provide the fiscal and familial stability that many conservatives prioritize.[[13]](#footnote-13)

One might think that there is a notable disanalogy between (a) the familiar financial legacies transmitted within families and (b) climate legacies. Insofar as (a) are largely products of an individual’s choices, but (b) are largely outside an individual’s control, we might expect the latter to be less motivating.[[14]](#footnote-14) For agents must believe in their own efficacy to be motivated to act (Bandura, 2010). Individuals are motivated to leave financial legacies (when they are) in part because they believe it is possible for them to do so, but they are less likely to have a parallel belief regarding their climate legacy, since the climate crisis is a collective action problem.

Our climate legacies do depend on what many other people and institutions do. But while pervasive cultural and legal individualism certainly encourage Americans to believe that our financial legacies are products of our individual choices, I think we habitually overestimate how much control individuals have over them. Such legacies depend not just on one’s choices, but also on the specific historical, social, economic, and political context one inhabits: previous generations’ choices; differential availability of education, income, and financial services; tax and other legal policies; social norms regarding consumption; religious norms relating to family obligations; and much more. While people might *feel* more individually in control of their financial legacies than their climate legacies, such feelings are not necessarily accurate. Leaving any type of “individual” legacy is a much more collective endeavor than is often supposed. That does not stop people from wanting to leave legacies and acting to do so, when they believe they can. Thus, to address the climate crisis, in combination with using CLIMATE LEGACY, we need to help people self-identify (individually and collectively) as efficacious.

But efficacious *at what*? Overcoming inertia? Getting results? Individuals’ actions have limited impact on the climate itself, and no one can make or enforce policy alone. Even collectives have limited control over their climate legacies defined in terms of quantifiable results, because other agents exercise control over available technologies, social safety nets, legal systems, and other factors that impact emitting practices. However, agents have relatively more control over their climate legacies defined as unquantifiable cultural artifacts. For while no agent has absolute control over how much they emit, every agent has significant control over whether they *acquiesce* to the status quo, *express* support for change, or *try* to solve a problem. The cultural climate legacy of an agent that unsuccessfully lobbies for improved climate policy is better than that of one that never speaks out (or worse, lobbies against it) – even if their emissions are identical. Agents that make an effort (whether or not they achieve all their goals) have something to be proud of, something future generations can appreciate.

Another potential disanalogy involves the recipients of different kinds of legacies. Many people are motivated to leave financial legacies to shield certain identifiable others (often biological relatives) from dangers or to give them other benefits. But our climate legacies’ beneficiaries are not so often or clearly identifiable, which can be a motivational hurdle.

True enough. Yet, some people’s primary motive in leaving a legacy is simply to ensure that their own name lives on, if not via offspring, then by reputation for their accomplishments. Such cases are evidence that people can be motivated to leave legacies without caring about exactly who benefits thereby. However, even regarding agents who want their legacies to benefit identifiable others, there is (bittersweet) hope for CLIMATE LEGACY’s motivational power. For as the negative consequences of climate destabilization become more apparent in the present and closer to home, and as awareness of the co-benefits of climate-stabilizing action (green jobs, improved public health, etc.) increase, the beneficiaries of the actions we take to improve our climate legacies will become increasingly identifiable. They will include members of near-future and existing generations and of our own local communities, and thus be just as identifiable as the beneficiaries of our legacies as more traditionally understood.

* 1. Further Strengths and An Interpretive Challenge

Let us consider further how best to interpret and use CLIMATE LEGACY.

It is good that we can use this concept to think about either an individual’s or a group’s cumulative impact on the climate (whether the groups are political units, corporations, NGOs, or other collectives with some form of agency, like the World Bank).[[15]](#footnote-15) For, as noted, collective climate action is desperately needed, but for that to occur, we also need individual motivation and action; generally, motivation and action at the two levels are mutually reinforcing. So, climate-stabilizing concepts that are apt at both levels are preferable.

Another benefit of CLIMATE LEGACY is that this concept makes our agency salient, especially the possibility of using it for good, since amassing and bequeathing legacies are widely considered admirable exercises of agency.

It is also a strength that CLIMATE LEGACY can be cashed out quantificationally or not. For now, I focus on interpreting CLIMATE LEGACY quantificationally; I say a bit more about non-quantificational interpretations in the next subsection.

When thinking quantificationally, should we understand climate legacies in terms of the net lifetime GHG emissions (1) for which an agent is causally responsible, (2) from which an agent has benefitted, or perhaps (3) an aggregation of those two types? Since I lack the space to defend one interpretation over the others, I shall simply outline some key issues that need to be confronted to decide between them.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Interpreting climate legacies in terms of causal responsibility (option 1) is most permissive, because agents often benefit from emissions they did not cause. We can benefit without exercising agency (and even when actively trying not to). For example, I gain certain “benefits” (like access to cheap gasoline) from lax U.S. climate policies, but I wish that I did not. Such “benefits” are, in a sense, forced on me (indeed, I do not conceptualize some as benefits). Thus, some folks will deny that they are part of *my* climate legacy. Moreover, we in wealthy, industrialized nations benefit from previous generations’ emissions, which enabled our way of life, but we cannot be causally responsible for emissions that predate us. (In contrast, causing emissions without benefitting from them is relatively rare.) So, for those who hope to motivate more climate-stabilizing action by setting higher standards, options (2) or (3) are likely more appealing, since they factor in both the legacies we inherit and those we leave.

However, the difficulties of quantifying climate legacies are exacerbated thereby, since options (2) and (3) involve controversial value judgments about what counts as a benefit, which can be sidestepped by choosing option (1). (Not that determining causal responsibility is easy.)

Moreover, option (1) will likely appeal to people who think we can only be morally responsible for our *choices and their effects*. Many people probably think of legacies similarly: as existing only when both epistemic and control conditions are met. On such a view, it is not *my* legacy unless I intentionally, knowingly bequeath it (“accidental” legacies “don’t count”). People who believe this are likely to say that our climate legacies should be understood only in terms of the impacts on the climate for which we are both causally and morally responsible. Insofar as this type of view is common, choosing option (1) might be best for motivating more people.

But some people (like Angela Smith (2005) and myself) deny that we must have direct, voluntary control over or understanding of our thoughts, feelings, and actions in order to be morally responsible for them. Instead, we say that people can be responsible for whatever rationally reflects their evaluative judgments. One can, for instance, be morally responsible for unthinkingly accepting lax federal climate policies because one’s *lack* of attention and action reflects one’s evaluative judgments that GHG emissions (or systemic regulation of them) are relatively unimportant. This account of moral responsibility seems equally compatible with interpreting climate legacies in terms of option (1), (2), or (3).

While option (3) has the benefit of more thoroughly capturing our interactions with the climate, it would be practically challenging to quantify and aggregate both causal influences and benefits. We would also need to decide whether to weight the emissions we cause and the emissions we benefit from differently.

Regardless of which strategy we use to quantify climate legacies, some degree of approximation will be inevitable. So, we will have to settle for the highest degree of precision we can achieve using the best data we can access.

2.2 Rhetorical Complications

My first draft of this paper was about *carbon* (not *climate*) legacies. However, strictly speaking, carbon legacies could not include non-carbon GHG emissions. So, since some folks already find carbon-equivalents confusing, I decided to shift gears.

I then started writing about *emissions* legacies. For carbon (dioxide) can seem rather abstract (or simply natural), whereas emissions are more clearly products of *human activities*. But strictly speaking, emissions legacies would not include any GHG capture or storage, and sequestering activities matter to agents’ overall climate impacts without changing their *emissions*.

I settled on CLIMATE LEGACY as an umbrella concept suited to a wide array of contexts.[[17]](#footnote-17) For the general public, CLIMATE LEGACY seems best, but perhaps specialists should sometimes focus specifically on carbon or emissions legacies. The evaluative language we use to describe such legacies is key. To avoid ambiguity and confusion, we should *not* call them “negative” or “positive.” For a “negative” emissions or carbon legacy might be good, if it refers to a negative number (since offsets exceeded emissions); however, it might be bad, if “negative” means undesirable, harmful, or unfair (since emissions were not offset). So, describing carbon or emissions legacies as “low” or “high” might be best when more exact measurements are unavailable.

In casual settings, I encourage us to use thicker descriptors. We can call low emissions legacies “commendable,” “fair,” “sustainable,” “helpful,” “meritorious,” “patriotic,” or “valuable” and call high emissions legacies “selfish,” “unfair,” “toxic,” “unsustainable,” “criminal,” “disloyal,” or “harmful.” Most of these terms evoke character traits, and thus using them to communicate about climate legacies may help inspire action in a way that terms relating to rigid, law-like duties and responsibilities often fail to (Booth, 2009, 56-57). Since few people consider leaving a financial legacy a moral requirement, avoiding the language of obligation when describing climate legacies is probably advisable. Another benefit is that thick terms are more fine-grained, and thus can be employed in context-specific ways. Depending on the economic status, political leanings, and other characteristics of one’s audience, I recommend using different thick evaluative terms to communicate about admirable and disgraceful climate legacies.

1. Advantages of CLIMATE LEGACY Over Other Familiar Concepts

In the next three subsections, I contrast CLIMATE LEGACY with other, more widely used concepts and explain the former’s advantages. However, to be clear, I recommend adding CLIMATE LEGACY to one’s conceptual repertoire, not ceasing to use those more familiar concepts.

* 1. CARBON FOOTPRINT

Many people have heard of carbon footprints and have a general idea of what they are and some options for how to reduce them. That existing familiarity makes CARBON FOOTPRINT useful in many contexts. Moreover, footprints are generally easier to visualize than legacies, which might make CARBON FOOTPRINT a better “entry-level” concept, especially for kids. That is a key consideration, given the sorry state of U.S. kids’ climate education highlighted by Kamenetz (2019) and Baumhardt (2020). For these reasons, one might think that continued use of CARBON FOOTPRINT is preferable to introducing a new concept like CLIMATE LEGACY.

However, one limitation is that carbon footprints are generally computed on an annual basis, whereas climate legacies are aggregative over a lifetime or the entire existence of a collective agent.[[18]](#footnote-18) This makes sense: (literal) footprints generally disappear fairly quickly, but legacies (are intended to) last. Thinking about longer-term aggregations encourages us to (a) take seriously the compounding effects of climate change, (b) compensate for past emissions, not just new ones, and (c) avoid paralyzing guilt when we must go through a high-emission period, so long as we offset it as soon as we can. For, at different life stages and as one’s context changes, one’s needs regarding emissions can vary substantially, as can one’s ability to mitigate them.

Probably more importantly, understanding carbon footprints has evidently not motivated agents to *do* all that much. To understand why familiarity with carbon footprints might not be particularly motivating, note that in most contexts, leaving a footprint is either evaluatively neutral (a footprint on a sandy beach) or to be avoided (a muddy footprint on a carpet), but leaving a legacy is something we evaluate positively and aspire to do. Legacies are generally perceived as sources of inspiration, not desecration. Since the valence of our framing often makes a big difference in how people respond to problems, questions, events, and objects (Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth 1998), using a concept that emphasizes what we want to *pursue*, rather than *avoid*, could be quite useful.

CLIMATE LEGACY also facilitates thinking of our relations to others, since legacies necessarily link legators and legatees. In contrast, a footprint is created by one person at one moment. The individualism of the carbon footprint metaphor obscures how GHG emissions depend on and influence many social, economic, and political structures and practices. Sure, we calculate national level carbon footprints to compare countries’ emissions. But CARBON FOOTPRINT is not *necessarily* a social concept, whereas CLIMATE LEGACY is, which is a good reason to make use of the latter.

* 1. CLIMATE JUSTICE

Speaking of social relations, CLIMATE JUSTICE might seem like a necessarily social concept that precludes any need for CLIMATE LEGACY, since we use the former to think about fairly distributing benefits and burdens. But while CLIMATE JUSTICE is an essential concept, it is generally used to think about our moral relations to more or less spatially distant current others. In contrast, CLIMATE LEGACY does more to evoke thoughts about our moral relations to past and future others. So, it is better suited to draw attention to future others and to motivate acting either with their interests in mind or at least to secure ourselves a good reputation in their minds.

Furthermore, CLIMATE JUSTICE explicitly calls to mind just one specific value: justice. Research by Graham, Haidt, and Nozek (2009) and Feinberg and Wehling (2018) suggests that political liberals tend to consider justice and harm avoidance to be the most crucial values, so we can expect CLIMATE JUSTICE to motivate them. But apparently justice, by itself, is generally less motivating to political conservatives, who tend to also prioritize loyalty, authority, and purity.

In contrast, CLIMATE LEGACY, since it does not focus on a single value, is well suited to activate not just liberals’ concerns about intergenerational justice, but also conservatives’ concerns about intergenerational loyalty to predecessors. For generous legacy motives are often activated by contemplating what goods our predecessors left us – and when we are primed to consider our own legacies, legacy motives can override more selfish motives that otherwise tend to drive our behavior when we have received burdensome legacies from predecessors (Wade-Benzoni 2002, Wade-Benzoni and Tost 2009, and Bang, Koval, and Wade-Benzoni 2017).

Contemplating climate legacies also has potential to make salient another value prized by conservatives: purity. For legacies can be tainted, thereby contaminating their recipients, especially if the means by which they were amassed or those who bequeathed them were morally bankrupt. Consider the wealth and power gained by some descendants of slave-holders, corrupt politicians, war profiteers, scammers, and colonizers. Such legacies are ill-gotten gains, a fact that many of their recipients studiously avoid admitting (to themselves and others).[[19]](#footnote-19) Other legacies are pure and untainted; recipients can accept them with clean consciences and embrace an unproblematic loyalty to their benefactors. Generally, agents only want to leave untainted legacies (or at least ones that appear untainted). Indeed, research shows that leaving a negative legacy is particularly aversive.[[20]](#footnote-20) So, the possibility that our legacies could be tainted by how we create them may motivate conservatives to take more climate-stabilizing action, given their concerns about purity. At least, the interaction of thoughts about purity, emissions, and legacy motives merits further study.

Thus, CLIMATE JUSTICE can be expected to disproportionately motivate political liberals and to make salient the claims of spatially distant but currently existing others, while CLIMATE LEGACY can be expected to motivate a more balanced mix of liberals and conservatives and to make salient our moral relations to temporally distant others.

* 1. CARBON NEUTRALITY

Finally, insofar as a good climate legacy is a goal to strive for, one might think that we already have a more specific, and thus better, goal to aim for: carbon neutrality.

Both CLIMATE LEGACY and CARBON NEUTRALITY are goal-oriented, but they provide different ideals at which to aim. What counts as a good climate legacy varies greatly with context, whereas what counts as carbon neutrality is fixed. Granted, we can employ different strategies to achieve carbon neutrality, but the goal itself is static. Why is that a problem?

First, for some individuals and groups, carbon neutrality is a completely unattainable standard to aim for, because of poverty, unusual medical needs, or other factors beyond their control. Suggesting that such agents aim for carbon neutrality might discourage them from doing any climate-stabilizing activities whatsoever. Even if not, it is unfair for privileged third parties to pressure marginalized agents to pursue the ideal of carbon neutrality. Justice demands that those who have done relatively little to cause or benefit from GHG emissions be allowed to emit enough to meet their basic needs and get help in adapting to the harmful consequences of climate change caused by others’ self-interested behavior. But leaving an admirable climate legacy is still open to all, since everyone can make some emission-minimizing choices within the constraints they face and can contribute to creating or maintaining cultural, political, and economic systems in which emission minimization is highly valued.

By contrast, aiming for carbon neutrality is a pretty pathetic ideal for others, especially supremely privileged individuals and groups; they are capable of doing much, much more. We should encourage, if not require, them to do so, and CLIMATE LEGACY can be a tool for doing so.

Finally, note that, as with CARBON FOOTPRINT, CARBON NEUTRALITY is not new, and yet few agents are seriously working toward that goal. Shifting how we conceptualize our goal, to focus on the climate legacies we want to leave, seems worth a shot.

1. Potential Next Steps

My goal in promoting CLIMATE LEGACY is to provide a conceptual tool to motivate ourselves and others to perform more climate-stabilizing activities. So, let us consider some climate-stabilizing activities and policies that we might support by using CLIMATE LEGACY.

* 1. Tax Law Changes

There are many ways tax laws could reward low-emitters, discourage future emissions, encourage offsetting, and collect revenue to fund climate action. To improve our collective and individual climate legacies, a carbon tax, as traditionally understood (that is, as a consumption tax), is one but not the only option.

Tax laws relating to financial legacies, gifts, and charitable contributions (that is, transfer taxes) are ripe for revision. In 2021, individuals in the U.S. are entitled to bequeath up to $11.7 million without paying any estate taxes (the figure is double for couples).[[21]](#footnote-21) We could collectively demand that legislators reduce that exemption or raise the tax rate and use the revenue to pay for climate action. Alternatively, we might consider one’s net lifetime emissions a debt to be paid, wholly or in part, by one’s estate before allowing bequests to be disbursed.[[22]](#footnote-22)

We could use additional tax credits, exemptions, or deductions to incentivize climate-stabilizing activities. Some such incentives already exist (like for installing solar panels), and some climate-stabilizing activities (like using public transit) are already publicly subsidized. We could encourage folks who want to donate to climate-stabilizing organizations to do so sooner (*inter vivos* rather *post mortem*) by increasing the tax deduction for donations to climate-stabilizing non-profits, since the state has a legitimate interest in prompt climate-stabilization. Many such proposals are worth considering.

* 1. Investment & Divestment

Recently, options for climate-friendly investment and divestment have increased substantially. Many mutual funds, ETFs, and other investment instruments selectively exclude highly climate-destabilizing companies, and an increasing number selectively include only those that actively pursue climate stabilization.

While individuals can express their values by choosing such investments, institutional investors, wealth managers, and boards of directors have substantially more power in this domain. Learning about low carbon investment options and presenting them as the viable options they are could shift substantial resources in a more climate-friendly direction. Decision-makers are unlikely to do this without pressure from below, but a little effort can go a long way. For example, in under a year, I identified and consulted with dozens of like-minded university colleagues and made a pitch to our retirement plan oversight committee, who subsequently implemented a policy update that allows us to invest employer-sponsored retirement savings in low carbon mutual funds for the first time. Thus, employees who pursue that option and the university as a whole can legitimately claim some improvement in our climate legacies (a claim which could help catalyze further action).

* 1. Research and Education

For all the actions discussed here, empirical research will be crucial. We need natural scientists, engineers, statisticians, economists, and other experts to develop algorithms for calculating approximate emissions legacies. We need social scientists to study how different groups of people respond to questions and informational materials relating to climate legacies. And we need funding for that research.

We also need to disseminate messages about climate legacies. Public schools, public service announcements, and other campaigns can help agents contemplate their climate legacies. But effective communication must be both top down and bottom up. I encourage explicit public discussions of the values at stake, including why we should care about climate legacies and how they relate to our moral responsibilities and shared values. For our actions always implicitly endorse some values, and we are better off if we acknowledge and think critically about them. Besides, it is necessary, in a functioning democracy, to find and collectively address widely shared concerns.

But many Americans are squeamish about public institutions playing a significant or obvious role in value-laden education. Some people think that families and religious organizations are the only appropriate contexts for transmitting values. I challenge such people to instigate serious and sustained discussions about values relating to climate legacies at least in those private contexts, just as they may already discuss other kinds of legacies.

* 1. Carbon Offsets and Charitable Giving

Despite controversy about the value of voluntary carbon offset schemas,[[23]](#footnote-23) such programs do provide opportunities to stimulate reflection on our climate legacies. Priming thoughts about legacies when people are invited to buy carbon offsets for flights and car rentals might increase participation in such programs. At least, we should explore what difference it could make.

Similarly, when climate-stabilizing non-profits solicit funds, it may be useful to frame appeals in terms of donors’ climate legacies. This might be especially productive regarding planned gifts (posthumous donations incorporated into estate plans) – and many large non-profits do have specialist fundraisers of this sort.[[24]](#footnote-24)

* 1. Social Media

While I am skeptical about social media’s value in general, and especially as an activist tool (see Gladwell, 2010), it can help agents achieve worthy goals. So, consider the following ideas.

Referring to climate legacies on social media could encourage reflection and dialogue about how we impact the climate. We could promote climate-stabilizing actions, organizations, and policies using hashtags like “#fairclimatelegacy” or “#patrioticclimatelegacy.” In contrast, using “#climatelegacydisaster” could help identify agents that are driving the climate crisis, either directly through emissions or indirectly, by undermining scientists or blocking climate-stabilizing policies. (Signs and chants about climate legacies might also be effective at protests.)

Social media users tend to present highly curated versions of themselves, selectively sharing their most “impressive” facets, so social media culture is quite aspirational (Vogel et al. 2014).[[25]](#footnote-25) It tends to index individuals’ social status to (apparent) luxury consumption. But it also provides opportunities to challenge the status quo. One’s posts can educate others about the climate legacies of people, products, and practices. Since many people and companies use social media for social validation, regularly withholding that validation, or actively invalidating climate-destabilizing choices and policies, might have significant motivational effects.

1. Conclusion

I have outlined a framework to use in evaluating concepts’ potential to motivate climate-stabilizing activities and defended the use of CLIMATE LEGACY insofar as it fulfills all five desiderata and has multiple additional advantages, which I highlighted by contrasting it with CARBON FOOTPRINT, CLIMATE JUSTICE, and CARBON NEUTRALITY. I have also considered some challenges for my view and identified five areas where we could start using CLIMATE LEGACY to motivate action. More generally, I aimed to spark reflection about which concepts might most productively be used to motivate climate-stabilizing activities.[[26]](#footnote-26)

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1. I follow the philosophical convention of using small caps when referring to a concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McGuire and Beattie (2019) show that self-reported pro-climate attitudes and behaviors exceed actual pro-climate behaviors. See also Sandler (2007, 116 and 170) and Gifford (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the need to change our concepts to respond to massive cultural and environmental changes, see Lear (2006), Thompson (2010), and Fredericks (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thanks to Marcus Hedahl for suggesting that I use ‘agents,’ not ‘people,’ to emphasize the need to motivate both individuals and collectives. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peeters, Diependaele, and Sterckx (2019) discuss those debates as applied to climate inaction. May (2017, §3 and §4) provides additional background. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. However, due to their sheer numbers, under-resourced people have a unique potential to facilitate climate stabilization *by banding together*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Specifically, McCright and Dunlap (2011) show that White male conservatives with atypically low environmental risk perceptions are most likely to be climate change deniers. This likely relates to their strong system justification tendencies. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kolbert (2017) summarizes relevant literature on confirmation and myside biases. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There is not much empirical research about how legacy motives vary with socioeconomic status, but Wade-Benzoni writes, “in literally dozens of experiments in which there were no material or economic incentives to give anything to future others, nearly everyone left something for future generations, and in fact there were surprising levels of intergenerational beneficence in light of the inherent barriers. … What people can get by acting on the behalf of future generations is legacy” (2019, 19). Most people leave legacies *if they can*, and wealthier people generally *can* leave material ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The extensive literature on loss aversion is relevant here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Other potentially climate-stabilizing concepts that merit further investigation include GREEN CRIME (Lynch et al. 2019), ECOCIDE (see [ecocidealliance.org](http://ecocidealliance.org/)), and CLIMATE RECKLESSNESS. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For something like this, see Moody (2009/2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lakoff (2004) distinguishes political conservatives from liberals partly by the former’s concern with perpetuating their worldview. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I discuss *agents’* climate legacies, but there is also a sense in which *products* have climate legacies (a.k.a. life-cycle emissions). I set that derivative meaning aside here. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Caney (2006) discusses problems with causal and beneficiary-based accounts of reparations for ecological debts or injustices. However, some of those problems only arise relative to intergenerational moral *duties* when many duty-bearers no longer exist. I, however, am not talking about moral requirements and am focused primarily on currently existing agents. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Since starting this project, I have found a few uses of the phrase “climate legacy.” For example, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick had a “Climate Legacy Campaign” (though the website is now defunct). Another website (<http://yourclimatelegacy.org/>) helps people predict how climate change will impact their descendants. Some Canadian seniors are organizing around the concept at <https://www.climatelegacy.ca>. See also Frumkin, Fried, and Moody (2012). However, people generally do not clearly define ‘climate legacy,’ nor actively, explicitly encourage thinking and communicating about climate legacies, except in limited contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. On the importance of a cumulative rather than annual focus, see Shue (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For an exception, consider Resource Generation, an organization described at <https://resourcegeneration.org>. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Though that research focuses on financially burdensome legacies, not necessarily morally burdensome ones. See Wade-Benzoni (2019) and Wade-Benzoni, Sondak, and Galinsky (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Read the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1> or see <https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/estate-tax>. Batchelder (2016) discusses great ideas for increasing efficiency and reducing inequality of U.S. wealth transfer taxes. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For national applications of the climate debt concept, see Pickering and Barr (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For example, Broome (2013) endorses and Davies (2007) opposes them. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For evidence that priming thoughts of death increases intergenerational beneficence, see Wade-Benzoni et al. (2012). On planned giving, see Richardson and Chapman (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Insofar as humans compete for relative social status and seek positional goods, we might try to leverage that tendency. It could be good if keeping up with the Joneses meant emitting less than they do. Such competition might be counterproductive or otherwise bad, but is worth considering. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For helpful feedback, I thank Ben Almassi, Jeremy Fischer, Sarah Fredericks, Marcus Hedahl, two anonymous referees, and audiences at Ball State University, the 2020 Association for Professional and Practical Ethics conference, and the 2020 International Society for Environmental Ethics session at the American Philosophical Association Central Division meeting. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)