

## **Bystanding and Climate Change**

### **ABSTRACT**

Most normative advice to individuals about what they should do to help prevent climate change focuses on reductions in personal emissions. This is consistent with an accountancy model of morality, with perpetrators held responsible for the harms they individually cause. An alternative focus receiving less popular and philosophical attention, but with greater potential to achieve substantial mitigation outcomes, is citizen activism for systemic reforms. Rather than perpetration (consisting of negligible contributions to climate change) priority moral concern can be directed to bystanding (as political passivity facilitating preventable and potentially catastrophic harms). To more effectively guide action, reformist ethics need to be informed by psychosociological research on motivation and societal transformation.

**KEYWORDS:** climate change, mitigation, bystanding, citizen activism, morality

### **INTRODUCTION**

What should individuals do to try to avert dangerous levels of global climate change?

Typically, citizens in developed countries are encouraged to do their bit by reducing personal greenhouse gas emissions – taking public transport, installing solar water heaters and using low-energy light bulbs, for example – bolstered by slogans such as ‘being green is easy’, ‘change a light, and you help change the world’, and ‘every bit makes a difference’. However, emissions that can realistically be reduced by voluntary individual actions account for only a small proportion of total emissions. In an optimistic scenario counter to current trends, if every household in high-emitting countries like the United States and Australia voluntarily reduced emissions by an average 25%, national emissions would drop by only about 5%.<sup>1</sup>

The only realistic way of achieving the substantial cuts needed is for governments to enact laws and policies to compel or facilitate low-emissions infrastructure and practices

across all sectors, including households. Such large-scale reform requires a strong political imperative, driven by citizen activism.

The response options – ‘individual emissions restraint’ and ‘citizen activism to reform the system to reduce national emissions’ – are not exclusive of each other, but appeal to different moral principles and imply different paths to reform. Primacy given one over the other or any assumed relationship between them are important issues in addressing questions about what should be expected of individuals.

The restraint model is consistent with the dominant view of moral obligations: that one should avoid causing harm to others (being a ‘perpetrator’ of climate change by contributing to high greenhouse gas emissions). The citizen activism model is consistent with what is typically regarded as supererogatory moral endeavour (behaviour that is admirable but not morally required): that one should try to prevent or undo harm caused by others. Political passivity in the face of climate change, even if one’s personal emissions are low, can be typified as a form of bystanding.

Crises often expose weaknesses in prevailing moral standards. The Nazi holocaust and other catastrophes since have focused attention on the moral status of bystanding, with recognition that perpetration of harm is sometimes facilitated by the passivity of those who could prevent it. That climate change as a driver of future catastrophe warrants application of the best science is widely accepted; that it also warrants the highest quality moral response is much less accepted and analysed, perhaps due to widespread skepticism about the potential for morally motivated solutions. Here it is argued that climate change warrants an expansive moral response that prioritises citizen activism. Standing by while emissions head to thresholds for dangerous climate change is to facilitate potentially catastrophic and preventable harms.

Here, I examine the normative status accorded to actions addressing climate change ‘perpetration’ or ‘bystanding’, on websites promoting climate change solutions and in the work of ethicists, and disparities between what is advocated and what is needed and morally warranted. I consider the merits and features of citizen activism as a response to climate change in terms of different ethical frameworks and motivational research.

## **BYSTANDING**

Bystanding under some circumstances is well recognised as a moral wrong. The term became prominent after the Holocaust, when scholars concluded that the widespread failure to help Jews and other victims of the Holocaust was essential to its occurrence:

The Holocaust happened in full public view; it reached awful culmination because millions were content to be bystanders ... The sober truth is, Hitler didn't need to turn the man on the street into a fanatical anti-Semite; he merely needed his acquiescence. As the British historian Ian Kershaw has written: ‘The road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with indifference.’ (Holocaust Survivors website<sup>2</sup>)

Bystanding is most often diagnosed and condemned when people fail to assist those in their immediate vicinity facing imminent physical harm. A famous example is the alleged failure of 38 witnesses to help Kitty Genovese during a half-hour sexual assault and fatal stabbing in New York in 1964. While much of this story was concocted by the media, it precipitated major research into the ‘bystanding effect’ (Manning et al. 2007). Bystanding is recognised as a criminal wrong in some circumstances, under laws in some countries requiring health professionals to report suspected child abuse or citizens to provide reasonable assistance to those exposed to grave physical harm, for example (McIntyre 1994; Bird 2005; Romohr 2006; Ashton 2009).

Bystanders are passive facilitators of harm rather than direct perpetrators. The principle they breach was expressed by Peter Singer (1972) as “if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.” Failure to prevent harm can be interpreted as partial responsibility for that harm.

However, as Singer discussed, many forms of bystanding behaviour are not widely regarded as moral wrongs. The condemnation for someone who ignores a nearby drowning person does not extend to affluent people who ignore the starving: “The charitable man may be praised, but the man who is not charitable is not condemned. People do not feel in any way ashamed or guilty about spending money on new clothes or a new car instead of giving it to famine relief” (Singer 1972: 235). Likewise, there is only limited moral pressure on people to prevent harm to other species. Actions to help starving people or threatened species are mostly regarded as supererogatory.

Excused forms of bystanding typically differ from condemned forms in the temporal, geographic or species distance between bystanders and victims, and the often diffuse, long-term or complex nature of the causes of harm. All these difference can be hallmarks of climate change bystanding. While they undermine capacity to render aid, and depress motivation, they are insufficient, it is contended here, to exclude these forms of bystanding from what ‘ought to be done’. If moral wrongs include the non-prototypical ‘distant/diffuse’ forms of bystanding considered here, then citizens may have moral responsibilities to go beyond personal mitigation to promote systemic reforms to reduce total emissions and help humans and other species survive climate change.

Symptomatic of its ambivalent moral status, there are few satisfactory antonyms of ‘bystanding’ to describe the moral action sought. There are antonyms for particular types of action – helping, philanthropy, Good Samaritan behaviour – but not for the category as a

whole. Occasional authors (eg. Broz 2006) have used the term ‘upstanding’ but as it is not in common usage, I use it sparingly and refer mostly to ‘citizen activism’ as the type of upstanding action most relevant to climate change reform.

To assess the validity of the triggering claim here that normative advice is predominantly focused on personal mitigation, I initially examine advice on popular websites about how individuals ought to contribute to climate change mitigation, comparing the relative extent to which it focuses on climate change ‘perpetration’ and ‘bystanding’. I also consider the focus of professional ethicists.

## **NORMATIVE ADVICE ON CLIMATE CHANGE RESPONSES**

There is a burgeoning plethora of advice for people about what they can or should do to address climate change, and numerous government and non-government programs seeking to enroll the public in mitigation. A Google search on the phrases ‘what you can do’ and ‘climate change’ returned about 240,000 hits on 30 September 2008, and 2.7 million hits on 30 December 2010.

The advice can be classified in terms of the focus of reform into three categories:

- (i) individual mitigation actions, such as installing a solar hot water system and limiting use of air-conditioners,
- (ii) collective mitigation actions, such as reducing electricity use in the workplace, and
- (iii) citizen activism for systemic reforms, such as lobbying for strong targets for national greenhouse gas emissions.

The first two categories are directed to perpetrators (emitters of greenhouse gas emissions), the latter to bystanders.

Table 1 shows the number of recommended actions in each of the three reform categories on websites returned in the top ranks of Google searches in 2008 and 2010 using the keywords ‘climate change’ and ‘what you can do’ (viewed 20 July – 4 August 2008 and 20 June – 3 July 2010).<sup>3</sup> The focus was overwhelmingly on reduction of personal emissions – about 85% of recommended actions. Collective responses constituted 8% of recommended actions and citizen activism 6%. Even amongst advocacy NGOs, the focus was mostly on personal mitigation; an average 14% of recommendations were directed to citizen activism.

The number of recommended actions is taken as a rough indicator of the normative priority accorded to them. Other indicators were consistent with this, with the same hierarchy in the listed order of actions and in their specificity: most citizen actions were listed last and mitigation recommendations were typically more specific (use energy-efficient lightbulbs vs write to a politician). Table 2 lists recommendations that appeared on at least half the websites, all focused on individual mitigation. Table 3 lists actions in the bystander category recommended on at least 10% of the websites.

Most websites emphasised that mitigation actions are simple and provide benefits such as lower energy costs. Most stated or implied that climate change can be addressed by everyone making small changes:

Change a light, and you help change the world.

Small changes to your daily life can add up to big changes to help stop global warming. These changes don't need to be difficult, nor do they need to involve giving up a lifestyle that we enjoy.

Even the smallest acts can add up to be something huge and planet-changing... after all, who'd have thought just leaving a TV on standby and forgetting to switch off a few lights would be some of the key contributors to the critical issues we now face with climate change?

None justified the optimistic rhetoric with information about the potential for personal mitigation to contribute to overall emission reductions. There was little rhetoric about the potential value of citizen activism. Although not analysed here, it is worth also noting the overwhelming focus on mitigation rather than adaptation measures for climate change.

Individual moral responsibilities under climate change has attracted surprisingly little philosophical attention and most of it has been directed to the question of whether personal mitigation actions are ethically warranted.<sup>4</sup> James Garvey (2005) in his rigorously reasoned book *Ethics of Climate Change* devotes most attention to an individual's obligations to reduce their own emissions before questioning in a brief final section (p. 151) whether this is sufficient:

Maybe no choice you make on your own can get you entirely clear of moral trouble, much less can you save the planet. This, and no doubt other thoughts too, can lead you to one last conclusion. You can hope to change not just your life, but your society. You can even be drawn to the view that collective action on climate change is not just desirable, but morally required.

However, Garvey interprets climate change activism narrowly as “a campaign for civil disobedience ... [that] is nothing other than a campaign by us, against us” and doubts it can succeed. More positive reference to citizen activism has emerged from other debate about whether individuals have obligations to reduce personal emissions. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) canvasses the potential of various moral principles to proscribe driving an SUV for fun, but dismisses them all as insufficient because the emissions are negligible for climate change. Instead, he concludes there is greater moral warrant in driving an SUV for fun while campaigning to make such behaviour illegal than there is in refraining. Baylor Johnson (2003) argues that as a ‘tragedy of the commons’ problem, climate change requires people to work towards a collective agreement rather than undertake futile unilateral action. Critiquing

Sinnott-Armstrong and Johnson, Marion Hourdequin (2010) argues that personal mitigation is a matter of integrity and can contribute to broader mitigation goals, by influencing others for example. However, citizen activism is only briefly addressed in each of these publications: as a possible obligation unlikely to succeed (Garvey 2005), as an assumed obligation along with personal mitigation (Hourdequin 2010), or as an obligation that applies instead of personal mitigation (Johnson 2003; Sinnott-Armstrong 2005). While sympathetic to the integrity argument of Hourdequin, I don't address the question of the extent to which personal mitigation should be a normative focus. Rather than arguing the case for or against personal mitigation, I explore the merits of a priority focus on citizen activism.

## **DISPARITIES**

In promoting individual responsibility for a systemic problem, the website messages analysed exemplify several inconsistencies besetting approaches to climate change reform. Particularly glaring is the disparity between rhetoric to reassure readers that their every contribution will make a difference and information about the escalation of global emissions and the extent of mitigation needed to prevent dangerous climate change. The jolly messages ignore the limited motivational appeal of individual 'drop in the ocean' mitigation options in the face of powerful situational factors motivating high personal emissions and rising business emissions. Promoting minimal response expectations (moral or otherwise) is incommensurate with the potential for catastrophic climate change outcomes. Trends in greenhouse gas emissions have been exceeding the worst case scenarios of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Raupach et al. 2007), including due to rising household emissions, despite many years of citizens being urged to do their bit.

Focus group studies in Britain by sociologist Catherine Butler (2010) involving 'lay citizens' who are subject to discursive efforts to cultivate responsibility for personal

emissions, as exemplified by the analysed websites, found they were aware of such disparities. Some participants expressed skepticism about the value of individual mitigation actions and struggled with the “inherent difficulty” of establishing themselves as moral by “doing everything one is supposed to” knowing that it was unlikely to make a difference. “The self-governance of restricting those actions which are designated as causing negative consequences for (future) others is juxtaposed against the continuation and progression of an industrialised wider society,” Butler (2010: 184) observes. She concludes that strategies for promoting personal mitigation fail to address problems of agency and that there should be a focus on finding “spaces for the enactment of change”.

The focus on individuals as “moral entrepreneurs” responsible for regulating their everyday behaviours that contribute to climate change risk is a feature of modern societies Ulrich Beck (2009) analyses and contrasts with individuals’ severance from decisions relevant to such global problems (the ‘agency gap’). Elizabeth Shove (2010) provides several examples of how policy responses to climate change are framed in these terms of personal responsibility for emissions, and comments that this focus by governments and business “obscures the extent to which governments sustain unsustainable economic institutions and ways of life, and the extent to which they have a hand in structuring options and possibilities.” A predominant focus on personal responsibility for regulating emissions suits powerful interests arrayed against systemic reforms.

The inadequacy of dominant ethical paradigms for global and intergenerational problems has led to calls for new ethical paradigms or new ethics (Jamieson 1992; Bauman 1995). Zygmunt Bauman (1995: 280) identified the need for “an ethics made to measure of the enormous space-and-time distance on which we can act and on which we act even when we neither know nor intend it”. The contention here is that a vital component of any new or reformed ethics is a shift in focus (not necessarily an abandonment) from individuals as

perpetrators responsible for their own emissions to citizens as bystanders responsible for sociopolitical action to promote systemic reforms.

### **BYSTANDING: CONSEQUENCES, PRINCIPLES, VIRTUES, MOTIVATIONS**

The focus here on aligning moral expectations with reforms needed to prevent dangerous climate change is most obviously consistent with a consequentialist ethics. It is consistent with other ethical frameworks as well: with a deontological approach in advancing principles about the wrongs of bystanding, and with virtue ethics in advocating the virtues of active citizenship.

#### ***Considering consequences***

From a consequentialist perspective the ‘do your bit’ focus of the websites has some superficial logic. In an accountancy approach to moral responsibility, if everyone voluntarily reformed their lifestyles to emit only their fair share of emissions, collective reduction goals (for household emissions) would be met. But this approach is undermined by (a) free-riding or refusal, with most people choosing not to reduce their emissions to a sufficient degree, (b) the practical and motivational difficulties of reducing emissions in societies whose cogs turn on fossil fuels and whose temptations are often greenhouse gas costly, and (c) the motivational barrier of knowing that reducing one’s own greenhouse gas emissions can have only a miniscule effect on climate change.

Few major social reforms (possibly none) have been achieved by voluntary, each-doing-their-own-bit efforts. Even where reforms are in people’s individual interests – health and safety reforms around smoking and seatbelts for example – they have required legal and policy measures to compel altered behaviours. Such reforms have typically been won by citizen activism building sufficient political pressure for systemic change.

Admittedly, a moral agent is far more guaranteed of achieving emission reductions via personal mitigation endeavour than via citizen activism, for influence over political processes is far from guaranteed and there is strong opposition to reforms. But collective action is required for either approach to succeed in reducing national emissions. As James Garvey (2005: 150) says of personal mitigation, “The little effects are the only effects you’ll ever have.” The potential mitigation outcomes from participation in collective citizen activism far outweigh those from collective voluntary mitigation, and far fewer citizen activists than voluntary mitigators are required to achieve outcomes.

Part of the consequentialist equation is accepting that human fallibility requires reform of the socio-economic factors that promote high-emission lifestyles and business practices rather than relying on morally committed individuals to adopt lifestyle reforms in opposition to dominant norms. Reducing one’s own emissions may have some consequential significance – demonstrating integrity and influencing others (Hourdequin 2010) – but moral mathematics is likely to favour activist efforts over personal mitigation.

If consequences are important, the hierarchy of normative advice needs revision, with stronger emphasis on the bystander rather than perpetrator categories of moral wrongs. This is happening to some extent, as exemplified by the Al Gore campaign, which has trained thousands of people to make presentations about climate change; the internet activism of groups like GetUp in Australia; and annual global warming marches. But they have not shaken the moral hierarchy reflected on the surveyed websites.

### ***Considering principles***

The dominant focus on individual responsibility for emissions derives from the deontic sphere of morality, “often taken as describing the minimal conditions of morality, the basic requirements of social morality that secure a just society” (Heyd 2008), which relies on people being held individually responsible for harms they cause to others. The major deontic

frameworks were developed long before humans were collectively capable of causing so much harm on such a large scale, and function primarily to facilitate social harmony and safety (Urmson 1958). The major deontic principle of ‘do not harm others’ does not work well for problems like climate change in which an individual’s actions are inconsequential but contribute to a serious collective problem.

An effective deontological response to climate change needs to extend beyond causality as the basis for moral responsibility into realms usually deemed supererogatory to harm prevention, as articulated by Singer (1972): ‘if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it’. Divisions between prescribed and supererogatory acts – between what ought to be done and what would be good to do – are far from clear or agreed, if they are granted at all. Under some moral frameworks, donating money to charity is supererogatory, while in others some level of charity is regarded as a duty (such as the tithe in Judaism). Some ethicists have argued that normativity cannot be split into the obligatory and the supererogatory, and that we should strive to achieve moral ideals (Pybus 1982).

Even if substantial limits to moral prescription are accepted, a strong case can be made that citizen activism for climate change reform should be regarded as more obligatory than optional extra. Consequences are of consequence for deontological ethics, with the strongest proscriptions (and some prescriptions) usually reserved for acts with the severest consequences (murder is more strongly proscribed than stealing). It was the enormity of harms committed during the Holocaust that prompted a focus on bystanding, driven by the intuition that such terrible wrongs surely justified a duty to intervene where possible. Similarly, the potentially catastrophic harms likely to result from climate change seem to warrant a stronger moral response than reducing one’s own emissions.

It is within the capacity of most citizens to take political action to advocate climate change reforms, so there is no barrier in terms of the ‘ought implies can’ principle. However, there are many harms worthy of citizen activism and one person can practicably be upstanding only on a limited array of moral challenges. Any individual is necessarily a bystander to many great harms.

In making the case for poverty alleviation as a moral duty, Singer (1972) argues there are no morally relevant differences between that and prescribed acts such as helping a drowning person. For example, with respect to distance, “it makes no moral difference whether the person I help is a neighbor’s child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away.” There are substantial differences between prescribed upstanding acts and activism for climate change, including separation of acts from consequences (temporally and geographically), the number of people who could help and uncertainty about outcomes. These factors have major consequences for moral motivation, but less for deontic justification. If the disasters predicted under climate change were to be compressed in time, and if they were to be inflicted on people and the environment around those of influence, there would be high prospects of a widespread normative imperative to drive systemic reform.

### ***Considering virtues***

More is likely to be revealed about bystanding in the Holocaust by asking questions from a virtue ethics perspective – ‘how could good people stand by?’; ‘what did they lack in character?’ – than from a deontological or consequentialist perspective – ‘what principles did they fail to follow?’; ‘what consequences did they fail to consider?’. Researchers have identified character traits distinguishing rescuers of Jews from bystanders during the Holocaust, including altruistic moral reasoning, a sense of social responsibility and empathic concern (Midlarsky et al. 2005).

Likewise, virtue ethics seems compatible with citizen activism as a moral response to climate change. John O'Neill (1993), among other environmental virtue ethicists, has suggested activism as a central avocation of good ecocitizenship. Possessing a virtue is a matter of degree (Athanasoulis 2000) rather than a division between what is prescribed and what is optional.

One strong advantage of virtue ethics is its focus on integrating ethics and eudaimonia (the good life). There is often perceived to be a fundamental incompatibility between the morally good life, if emissions frugality is taken to be an essential constituent of that, and versions of the good life involving high-emissions lifestyles. The backlash against climate change and rise of denialism are undoubtedly motivated in part by the perception that responding to climate change involves deprivation. Greater community willingness for systemic reform depends upon a re-evaluation of what constitutes a good life, and the demandingness of activism also needs eudaimonic rationales.

### ***Considering motivations***

Those who composed the website messages were probably not concerned so much with what advice is morally justified as with what most people can be motivated to do. The strategy seems to be to try to motivate some mitigation action, however minor, by encouraging readers to think they can contribute in a meaningful way to a larger outcome. The message-writers may hope to start responders on a path to more substantial contributions. But the motivational strengths of this approach may be less than assumed, counteracted by the de-motivating sense that an individual's mitigation efforts count for little or by complacency that trivial contributions are sufficient, and undermined by the lack of emotional, identity and relational engagement of most advocated actions (changing lightbulbs lacks both effect and affect).

Engendering either low-emissions lifestyle habits or activism for systemic reforms is difficult. Promoting sound moral reasons is typically insufficient to counteract lifestyle

preferences or bystanding passivity. Discussing similar difficulties in promoting moral responsibilities to address poverty, Judith Lichtenberg (2004: 94) concludes that moral philosophers “ought to change the subject—that we should concern ourselves less with the question of obligation and more with the question of motivation.” This is consistent with the broader need to ally moral theory with moral psychology for, as Mark Johnson (1996: 49) says, to do good moral theory we need to know “a tremendous amount about human motivation, the nature of the self, the nature of human concepts, how our reason works, how we are socially constituted and a host of other facts about who we are and how the mind operates.”

Surprisingly little is known about human motivation. While folk theories are rife, the science of human motivation is fragmented and lacks a sound theoretical basis. In Johnmarshall Reeve’s (2005: 39) definition of motivation as “those processes that give behaviour its energy and direction,” he uses the phrase ‘those processes’ in recognition that motivation researchers do not agree on what motivations actually are – whether they are “essentially needs, cognitions, emotions, or reactions to environmental events.” Psychologist Donald Laming (2004: 278) in a book entitled *Understanding Human Motivation* says that “our present understanding of human motivations is...too immature to justify the formulation of a scientific theory”.

All reform programs necessarily draw on theories or assumptions about motivation. Shove (2010) criticises the psychological model dominating public policy efforts to encourage individual mitigation actions for ignoring “a vast range of social theory that lies beyond the dominant paradigms of economics and psychology”. Under this model, reform is characterised as emerging from behavioural choices arising from changes in individuals’ values and attitudes. It casts social factors as barriers or incentives to responsible individual choices rather than the milieu in which individual behaviours are deeply embedded. Shove

questions its capacity to provide for comprehension or intervention in the “dynamic processes of social change on the scale required.”<sup>5</sup> Like reform programs, reformist ethics imply particular processes of societal transformation. The lifestyle restraint model relies on the broad social diffusion of exemplary everyday practices (for example, by relational influences as discussed by Hourdequin 2010), and the activist model on systemic changes compelling or facilitating particular practices deemed exemplary (imposed by governments emboldened by citizen activism, for example).

There is an increasingly nuanced understanding of people’s vulnerabilities under social pressures to perpetrate harm. As a classic in that endeavour exploring an extreme form of perpetration, Christopher Browning (1992) in *Ordinary Men* described the conformity pressures that motivated ‘ordinary’ policemen to become mass murderers of Jews during the Nazi era. Most of the actions facilitating the Holocaust did not so forcefully challenge moral prohibitions. As Bauman (1989: 16-17) emphasised in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, it relied on people carrying out “dull bureaucratic routine”, steps removed from the harm to which they contribute. Although, obviously, the psychosocial features of the Holocaust and climate change are different, they share the critical involvement of everyday actions that distantly and diffusely promote or facilitate great harm. Such features allow perpetrators to avoid consciously facing “either difficult moral choices or the need to stifle inner resistance of conscience” (Bauman 1989: 24) and demonstrate the limits of relying on individual moral regulation of actions that have only a weak causal link with harmful outcomes.

Understanding of the psychosociology of bystanding/upstanding is less theoretically developed than for perpetration/restraint, and most research has focused only on imminent unsought moral choices – ‘will I rescue this person or not?’ – rather than deliberative, sought choices such as ‘will I engage politically to help prevent climate change?’. The undoubtedly diverse motivations for citizen activism must be strong to overcome psychosocial forces that

sustain the passivity of bystanding, and to engender actions that break from the everyday (in contrast to mitigation reform focused on everyday actions). Motivations can be characterised as complexes of beliefs, emotions, perceptions and identities (Booth 2009). To be motivated, for example, to lobby for strong targets for emissions reductions may require a convergence of beliefs about the need for targets and moral responsibilities for citizen action, an emotional engagement with the issue, perceptions that it can make a difference and identification as a politically active citizen. Conversely, bystanding may be sustained by beliefs about the boundaries to moral responsibility, fear of or distaste for political involvement, perceptions of limited capacity and stronger commitment to identities other than citizen. The following very sketchy outline of the motivational landscape for citizen activism highlights some of its challenges.

*Perceptions of responsibility, competency and control:* Individuals are less likely to help someone in trouble if they are one of several people who could help than if they are alone (Latane and Darley 1970). This diffusion effect is at an extreme with climate change, for responsibility is shared across nations. Undoubtedly a strong sense of responsibility is required to motivate activism, to overcome the easy opt-out tendency to view it as others' responsibility.

Passivity may result from pessimism about the capacity to influence outcomes - when people do not feel capable, or social or political barriers seem too great. Individuals with higher perceptions of their competency and capacity for influence feel more responsible and intervene more than individuals with lower perceptions of their competence (Latane and Darley 1970; Pantin and Carver 1982; Cramer et al. 1988). Self-efficacy is an important element of motivation (Bandura 1977) and probably a necessary pre-requisite for citizen activism.

Bystanding can be promoted by various types of fatalistic thinking. Those who attribute the locus of control for events externally – to fate, luck or unchallengeable power, for example – are less inclined to intervene than those who situate the locus of control internally (Midlarsky 2005). Passivity can also be promoted by a tendency for ‘just world’ thinking, which interprets harm to others as the unfolding of a karmic sort of justice. In particular, when less-valued people and other beings suffer, there is a tendency to attribute it to the victims’ own flaws or behaviours (Staub 1989: 17). Activism requires rejection or accommodation of motivation-sapping fatalism.

*Emotional sensitivity and empathy:* With a bounded capacity for moral concern, people cannot care in any meaningful way about all wrongs encountered. Emotion is a psychological attention-grabber, so concern is likely to be focused on issues that are most emotionally affecting – on visible harms to people in the physical or emotional vicinity, for example (Bauman 1989: 25; Bar-on 2001). People often become activists when they or those close to them are under threat. Those likely to suffer most from climate change, including other species and future generations, tend to elicit less felt concern. Activism may require a morally attuned imagination to render ‘psychologically visible’ (Bauman 1989: 25) other people and other species, in other places and other times, suffering climatic harms.

Another cause of moral passivity is habituation to chronic moral wrongs. Compared to normal timeframes of crisis, climate change is long-term and easy to ignore on a daily basis. Habituation may promote adjustment to moral norms, so that perceived wrongs become acceptable because they are widespread and chronic (Bar-On 2001). Activism for climate change requires sustaining a sense of moral crisis and resisting the downgrading of norms.

*Political and social factors:* Bureaucracies can seem impenetrable and immune to the influence of ordinary citizens. They tend to be complex and fragmented, with barriers of structure, protocol and alliances with powerful interests opposed to reform (Bauman 1989;

Bar-on 2001). Agency gaps of various kinds – the real or assumed impotence of agencies to restrict the movement of capital, for example (Bauman 2001: 188) – are a challenging feature of political activism. There are also social challenges. People often feel uncomfortable about interactions with unknown people or taking a public stand. Public embarrassment was one reasons for bystanding in a study in which the majority of people avoided helping an apparently ill stranger on their path (Darley and Batson 1973). Activism requires a willingness to challenge hierarchies, social courage to interact with others, and knowledge about processes and institutions. Social involvement can be a positive feature of activism when action is taken in concert with others (in contrast to the less social lifestyle reforms). However, there is the ever-present need to resist conformity-promoting pressures within organisations, for the tendency to substitute private conscience with discipline to internal norms (Bauman 1989: 22) can apply to activist organisations as well as bureaucracies involved in defending harmful status quos.

*Cognitive characterizations:* As discussed, prevalent cultures of morality can constitute a barrier to activism by focusing on individual responsibility for direct harm to others. There is also widespread adoption of a simplistic moral relativism, which casts moral principles as no more than personal preferences, generating reluctance for moral advocacy. Although liberal political systems are built on a principle of citizen involvement in decision-making, there are cultural and logistical features mitigating against influence on problems like climate change. Norman Geras (1998) has characterised liberalism as based on a “contract of mutual indifference”, fostering a culture that “underwrites moral indifference”. As Geras (1998: 58) points out (referring to persecution and genocide), “A legal and moral culture of rights and obligations largely structured around the notion that one should refrain from harming others, but that helping them is a matter of individual inclination is plainly inadequate”. Engendering

large-scale citizen activism requires maximising the political potential of liberalism for citizen influence.

Although far from adequately understood, the relative motivational merits and challenges of lifestyle restraint and citizen activism are clearly very different. The former, involving everyday practices, has the advantage of relative ease, an aspect emphasised in website messages, while activism requires activities beyond the everyday, which may be demanding but can contribute to substantial mitigation outcomes. Garvey (2005: 152) too quickly dismisses the motivational potential of activism (which he terms ‘civil disobedience’, although activism does not entail disobedience) because he thinks people are unlikely to campaign for austerity. But if austerity was the only way to achieve mitigation goals, this would imply that barriers to a voluntary restraint model of reform are also too large, perhaps more so due to the perceived futility of effort. People choosing to reduce personal emissions would surely prefer that their fellow citizens be obliged to also do so, in part to make their own efforts count for something. Citizen activism could also reduce the need for austerity to achieve personal mitigation goals with reforms such as better public transport, a carbon tax, or large-scale renewable energy projects. Efforts could, of course, also totally fail, and even further entrench opposition to reform.<sup>6</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

As exemplified here by advice on popular climate change websites, efforts to engage citizens in climate change prevention focus predominantly on individual mitigation actions. This is consistent with an accountancy model of morality, which holds perpetrators responsible for the harms they individually cause. Although there are moral reasons for individuals to live low-emissions lifestyles – for integrity and to influence others by example – I have argued that normative priority should be accorded to citizen activism, as emission reductions

sufficient to prevent dangerous climate change can only be achieved by systemic reforms. Political passivity in the face of high national emissions can be characterised as facilitating potentially catastrophic and preventable harms. Bystanding to inadequate laws, policies and programs warrants greater moral concern than individual perpetration involving negligible personal contributions to climate change.

Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) also asserts this priority:

We should not think that we can do enough simply by buying fuel efficient cars, insulating our houses, and setting up a windmill to make our own electricity. That is all wonderful, but it does little or nothing to stop global warming and also does not fulfill our real moral obligations, which are to get governments to do their job to prevent the disaster of excessive global warming. It is better to enjoy your Sunday driving while working to change the law so as to make it illegal for you to enjoy your Sunday driving.

However, it is the conclusion rather than focus of his paper, and most other philosophical attention has also been directed to the merits or demerits of personal mitigation contributions (Garvey 2005; Jamieson 2007; Hourdequin 2010; 2011; Johnson 2011).

A moral focus on bystanding is consistent with major ethical frameworks that prioritise consequences, principles or virtues. As argued by Singer (1972) for poverty, the differences between condemned (eg. failing to rescue a drowning person) and excused forms of bystanding are insufficient to justify the obligatory/supererogatory moral distinction widely applied. Differences relevant to climate change such as temporal, geographic and species distance between perpetrators/bystanders and victims, and the diffusion and complexity of causes, are, however, motivational impediments.

Even in the face of atrocities, the majority of people have been bystanders (Midlarsky et al. 2005). Climate change qualifies as a crisis but doesn't intrude into daily life with the

emotion-wrenching immediacy of atrocities or natural disasters. In large part, motivational and moral relevance has to be engendered intellectually and reflexively. Bystanding passivity about climate change can be challenged by linking it with bystanding of other condemned sorts, as this paper does, and conducting education about its psycho-social features. Short (1999) recommended this to address bystanding to racist behaviours, on the basis that knowledge of the bystander phenomenon reduces its likelihood. Motivational theory is an essential underpinning for both practical mitigation programs and moral theory but is underdeveloped and fragmented. It is a substantial research gap warranting as much focus as climatological, technological and policy questions.

In contrast to glib assurances that small mitigation contributions by individuals can make a big difference, preventing climate change will require far-reaching transformation, described by Shove (2010: 6) as societal innovation “in which contemporary rules of the game are eroded; in which the status quo is called into question and in which more sustainable regimes of technologies, routines, forms of know how, conventions, markets and expectations take hold across all domains of daily life.” The norms promoted on the websites analysed here represent a moral minimalism incommensurate with the extent of reform needed and the potential catastrophes of mitigation failure. A great challenge requiring effort and innovation in multiple dimensions – scientific, technical, political, social and psychological – the threat of climate change also warrants an expansive moral focus. As argued here, this includes understanding and challenging climate change bystanding.

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**TABLE 1:** Numbers and types of recommended actions on websites promoting action on climate change

| Source of climate change advice  | Number of websites | Individual reforms                    | Collective reforms | Systemic reforms |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
|                                  |                    | Average number of recommended actions |                    |                  |
| NGOs                             | 20 (50%)           | 12.7 (75%)                            | 1.9 (11%)          | 2.3 (14%)        |
| Governments                      | 11 (28%)           | 20.1 (93%)                            | 1.5 (7%)           | 0.1 (<1%)        |
| Businesses                       | 5 (12%)            | 12.4 (100%)                           | 0                  | 0                |
| Educational/ professional bodies | 4 (10%)            | 26.5 (92%)                            | 2 (7%)             | 0.2 (1%)         |
| Total                            | 40                 | 16.1 (85%)                            | 1.6 (8%)           | 1.2 (6%)         |

**TABLE 2:** Actions recommended by at least half the websites

| climate change action | % websites |
|-----------------------|------------|
| Use public transport  | 60         |

| <b>climate change action</b>   | <b>% websites</b> |
|--|-------------------|
| Buy green power  | 57                |
| Use energy efficient practices in the home (eg. hand wash a few dishes ) | 55                |
| Walk instead of drive  | 55                |
| Adjust home heating/cooling  | 52                |
| Recycle  | 52                |
| Use energy efficient appliances  | 52                |
| Increase energy efficiency of home (eg. by insulation)                   | 50                |
| Use energy-efficient lightbulbs  | 50                |
| Use water efficiently (eg. energy-efficient showerhead)                  | 50                |

**TABLE 3:** Recommendations for citizen activism on at least 10% of the websites

| <b>Recommended citizen activism</b>                 | <b>% websites</b> |
|---|-------------------|
| Participate in NGO activities                       | 20                |
| Contact politicians to lobby for unspecified reform | 17                |
| Contact politicians to lobby for a specified reform | 17                |
| Contact media (eg. write a letter to the editor)    | 10                |
| Donate to an NGO                                    | 10                |

## NOTES

Thank you to two anonymous reviewers, whose suggestions and criticisms were helpful.

<sup>1</sup> Emissions from the residential sector in Australia and the US account for about 20% of each country's total emissions. See <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/government/reduce.aspx> and [http://www.eia.doe.gov/ask/environment\\_faqs.asp#source\\_by\\_sector](http://www.eia.doe.gov/ask/environment_faqs.asp#source_by_sector) (accessed 20 October 2009). Household emissions in both countries have substantially risen since 1990.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.holocaustsurvivors.org/cgi-bin/data.show.pl?di=record&da=texts&ke=6> (accessed 22 July 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> There was no significant difference between the two years sampled, so results were combined.

<sup>4</sup> There are relatively few philosophers working on climate change. In a preface to one of the few books on the topic, *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, Stephen Gardiner (2010) notes that as of January 2009 the *Philosopher's Index* listed only about 100 articles under 'climate change' and 'global warming'. A search of *Philosopher's Index* in August 2011 found only 85 articles with subject headings 'climate change' and 'ethics'. In the *Climate Ethics* publication, just two of 18 pieces were devoted to the topic of 'individual responsibility'.

<sup>5</sup> Shove's (2010) critique has in turn been criticised by Whitmarsh et al. (2011) for neglecting the role of individual change in social transformation and for "its simplistic portrayals of psychological models of behaviour".

<sup>6</sup> An anonymous reviewer made the point that activism can "feed into partisan politics – as in the US where some argue the Al Gore campaign ... has done more to polarise the debate and create resistance to systemic reform than it has done to drive it."