



Individual Moral Responsibility for Climate Change

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国際ワークショップ
レジリエントな
低炭素社会の構想

International Workshop
Visions of a Low-carbon
and Resilient Society

Introduction

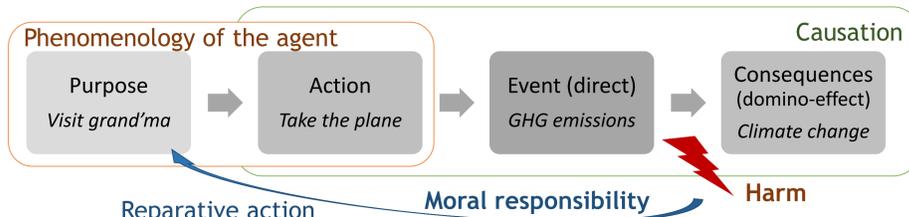
Climate change is caused by the accumulated effects of repeated actions by multiple individuals engaged in various practices emitting different amounts of greenhouse gases. Meanwhile, UNFCCC and IPCC guidelines, reports and summaries for policy-makers are primarily addressed to governments, partially including other main emitters such as big companies and multinational corporations. In other words, they tend to assign collective responsibility to nation-states and companies, who, in turn, are in charge of coordinating the actions of their individual members to reduce GHG emissions.

To complement this top-down approach that leaves individual actions unaddressed and sustainable individual behavioural changes voluntary, I argue for a bottom-up individual moral responsibility for climate change that encompasses lifestyles, passivity and harmful consequences mediated by other agents. I suggest that the degree of causal responsibility of the agent must be balanced with her degree of capacity-responsibility determined by the accessibility of doable alternatives. Then, the more an agent has powers as a group member, the more she is responsible to design the social structure and the infrastructures of the group towards sustainability.

Keywords: individual responsibility, environmental ethics, climate change, mitigation, adaptation.

Moral responsibility for environmental harm

What is it? **Forward-looking:** It connects a past harmful action or omission (relatively to sustainability) with a future expected action. (Young 2010)



Climate Change: Harm and Urgency

Climate change is caused by the accumulated effects of actions by multiples individuals. These actions are parts of lifestyles and practices that are supported by infrastructures, social structures and socio-cultural norms and expectations. Climate change has harmful effects on human health and flourishing at different scales all around the world. It is urgent to tackle climate change because of:

1. Extreme weather (heat waves, droughts, typhoons),
 2. Changes in food supplies and slowness of agriculture adaptation,
 3. Species extinction, among others. (Shue 1995)
- Vulnerability of the poorest

The milieu (風土) is the environment that surrounds us, as we perceive it covered with webs of meanings. It is both a matrix nurturing, shaping and guiding us, and the imprint that we leave by inhabiting it. (Watsuji 2004, Berque 2000)

Milieu as matrix

Capacity

Constraints

What criteria affect the capacity to be responsible?

Under what conditions is responsibility properly ascribed?

The individual is shaped by the milieu as a matrix because

- she is making sense of the world in a relational and participatory way (De Jaegher 2007),
- she is borrowing concepts and ideals from the cultural imaginary (Geertz 1993),
- and she acts guided and constrained by practices rooted in the milieu (Haslanger 2018).

Vary in degree depending on:

- What she can think of: the accessibility of alternatives (within the bowl of her imaginary) and her state of knowledge (predictability)
- How hard it is for her to act differently: challenging practices, facing social risks.
- Her vulnerabilities and powers (basic needs vs. resource (Jasper 1997)) (Hart 1961)

Basic threshold: The individual should not be exposed to (worse) threats to her basic needs by doing the environmentally better actions (Shue 1999).



The individual leaves direct and mediated imprints on the milieu (locally, on distant milieus, and globally). (Droz 2018)

- Regardless of one's intentions, awareness and knowledge, an individual agent has significant mediated effects on the milieu by virtue of being a member of a social structure. (Attfield 2009)
- There are consequences of one's existence (market analysis), one's being somewhere (shame), one's appearance and social role (body language), and one's inaction. (Droz 2019)

What are the objects of responsibility ascription? **Wide-encompassing:** Actions, omissions (Cullity 2015), habits, lifestyles, and one's very existence.

Who is causally responsible for what? **Vary in degrees** depending on the number of interventions by other agents in the causal chain, regardless of the temporal and spatial distances between the agent and the harm.

What are we responsible to do?

Reparative actions

Individuals, within the limits described above, are responsible to take reparative actions, that is, to change their lifestyles and habits.

- **Isolated individual actions:** Recycling, reducing energy consumption, avoiding taking the planes, etc.
- **Responsible consumption choices:** Boycot products coming from distant areas, boycott products coming from deforestation, buy local, eat less bovine meat, etc.

... but it doesn't stop here!

- **Collective actions:** Take part in (or launch) activities in the local milieu aiming at reducing collective local emissions.
- **Political actions:** Support and vote (if available) for policy-makers and policies that aim at designing a low-carbon society; get engaged and share solutions on social media, pressure the government to join and respect international climate change agreements, etc. (Parkin 2010)
- **Institutional actions:** Help create institutions that support low-carbon practices ("just institutions" (Tan 2015)), etc.

Importantly, behaving ethically is not a one-time deed, but a continuous self-reflective and critical process that also involves our relationships with others and with the milieu.

Milieu as imprint

Agency

Contribution



Conclusion

Top-down approaches on climate change action are undeniably needed, as they compile scientific research and advices (IPCC) and coordinate efforts globally (UNFCCC), but they can be successful only if they are complemented with bottom-up movements. My forward-looking and wide-encompassing account of individual moral responsibility that varies in degrees and is sensitive to the vulnerabilities and basic needs of each individual aims at guiding each of us to take our own individual responsibility for climate change.

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