On individual and shared obligations: in defense of the activist’s perspective

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1. An urgent case study: climate obligations

Anthropogenic climate change threatens to cause tremendous harm. One potentially debilitating fact about the size and nature of this threat is that

INDIVIDUAL INEFFICACY: With few exceptions, action by an individual human agent is extremely unlikely to significantly reduce the threat.

However successful we will be in reducing the threat or preventing the harm, the extent of that success is unlikely to have been much affected by my actions, and the same seems true for most human beings. (Exceptions might include leaders of powerful states and organizations. In addition, powerful states and organizations are themselves actors capable of significantly reducing the threat. I set these to the side: my concern is with the rest of us.)

In light of INDIVIDUAL INEFFICACY, it might also seem that

NO INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATION: Because of INDIVIDUAL INEFFICACY, the goal of significantly reducing the threat of climate catastrophe cannot provide individual human agents with instrumentally based moral reasons or moral obligation to work towards that goal.1

In itself, this is a deeply unsatisfying perspective on one of the greatest challenges faced by humankind. However, the individual perspective is not the only practical perspective one can take, and a collective perspective seems more inspiring. For example, we can think of ourselves as members of the group of moral agents currently inhabiting Earth, or of some subgroup of such agents who could take serious action to reduce the threat without depriving themselves of a reasonably good life or risking political repression. Having such a group in mind, we can say that

COLLECTIVE EFFICACY: Together, we can significantly reduce the threat (at an acceptable cost).2

1 Cf. e.g. Nefsky 2011; Sinnott-Armstrong 2010. To say that we lack instrumentally based moral reasons or obligations is not to say that we lack other kinds of reasons, such as reasons of self-expression (for discussion, see e.g. Brennan and Sayre-McCord 2015). To say that individual human agents lack instrumental reasons to work towards significantly reducing the threat is not to say that they lack such reasons to marginally reduce the threat. More on these matters in section 3.

2 Costs need to be measured against the costs of not taking action, costs that would be significant for those who are young today and their children. Exact cost estimates from IPCC and others vary considerably depending on what assumptions are made, but cost estimates for quick and decisive global action suggest individual burdens falling far short of the sorts of costs countless people pay every
This is exactly the sort of fact that motivates individuals to join collective efforts (see e.g. Van Zomeren et al. 2008). Moreover, it likely motivates because it seems that

**COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION:** In virtue of COLLECTIVE EFFICACY, we have instrumental moral reasons to significantly reduce the threat of catastrophic climate change, reasons grounding a moral obligation on our part to do so.

and because it seems that

**RESULTING INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATIONS:** In virtue of COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION, individuals in this group have instrumental moral reasons to contribute to significantly reducing climate threat, reasons grounding individual moral obligations to do so.

The latter of the two claims directly contradicts NO INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATION. Morally speaking, the threat and our joint capacity to significantly reduce it call on us as individuals to do our part. This undermines the debilitating conclusion of INDIVIDUAL INEFFECTICACY.

The combination of COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION and RESULTING INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATION constitute what I take to be a typical activist’s perspective, the sort of perspective found among people who contribute substantial amounts of time or money towards climate threat reduction. But however intuitively appealing and inspiring, both claims might seem open to powerful objections.

First consider COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION. On the one hand, this claim would be implausible if understood distributively, as implying that *each of us* has a reason or even an obligation to significantly reduce the climate threat. So understood, it seems to imply the falsehood that each of us has the capacity to do so. On the other hand, the claim would also seem deeply problematic if understood as attributing obligations to us *as a group*. Our group quite clearly lacks the organization and capacities required to be a bona fide moral agent, in particular a faculty of rational deliberation and control that lets us coordinate our activities towards goals. Some will say that we can get organized and form a body allowing us to collectively pursue catastrophe prevention based on such organization, and further say that this *potential* for moral agency grounds a collective obligation (Wringe 2010: 221–24; 2016: 13–14). But since the potential to satisfy basic conditions of moral agency is typically not enough to make something an obligation bearer—the toddler has no obligations in the relevant sense, nor the person who is in shock and temporarily lacks reliable action control or

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3 Following Virginia Held (1970), many have accepted the general idea that unstructured groups can have obligations. For one recent book-length treatment of the specific case of climate change, see Cripps 2013.

4 Collins 2012 argues that attributions of collective obligations need to be reinterpreted when the collective does not itself constitute an agent; my proposal, in effect, that there is no such need. Cf. Lawford-Smith 2015.
has no unified coherent perspective on her situation—something needs to be said about why certain forms of potentiality matter.⁵

Second, suppose that we nevertheless insist on COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION, perhaps because it seems intuitively compelling.⁶ Then the problem of INDIVIDUAL INEFFECTIVITY remains as a problem for RESULTING INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATIONS. Exactly because there is no immediate connection between a collective obligation grounded in COLLECTIVE EFFICACY and individual agents’ capacity to make a significant difference with respect to the fulfillment of that obligation, it is unclear how that goal can ground instrumental reasons for the individual to contribute.

The task of this paper is to explain how, in spite of these problems, COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION and RESULTING INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATION are intelligible, at least somewhat plausible, and compatible with INDIVIDUAL INEFFECTIVITY. In previous work, I have suggested that we should understand the relevant kind of collective obligation as shared obligation (Björnsson 2014). Because the subject of the obligation in question is a plurality of individuals each satisfying the conditions of moral agency, it is non-mysterious that members of disorganized groups that do not together constitute unified agents can nevertheless have obligations. In section 2, I will briefly recount and motivate this understanding of shared obligations, explaining how it follows naturally from an attractive account of individual obligations. In sections 3 and 4, I then explain how, given this understanding of obligations, COLLECTIVE EFFICACY and COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION can provide the individual agent with instrumentally based reasons to contribute and ground moral obligations to do so.

My ambition is to show that the activist’s perspective on our climate related obligations is coherent and sensible, not necessarily that it is correct. For this reason, I will take a number of things for granted, most obviously the reality of anthropogenic climate change and the moral importance of the threat it poses. In sections 3, I will make further normative assumptions based on intuitions about cases. I will not provide a lengthy defense for these assumptions apart from some initial intuitive support, as one can agree that the perspective is coherent and sensible without ultimately accepting its normative content.

2. Obligations and essentially shared obligations

Can collectives that do not themselves constitute moral agents have moral obligations? To answer this question, we are helped by a clear general understanding of what moral obligations are. Unfortunately for our purposes, there is no one sharp notion of moral obligation, and philosophers variously appeal to objective and subjective obligations, and to all-

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⁵ Tracy Isaacs (2011, ch. 5) suggests that groups of the right kind can have “putative” collective obligations that can serve to guide the actions of moral agents in much the way that ordinary obligations do. Even if this is right for the sorts of cases that Isaacs discusses, however, it is not clear how it applies in the case of climate change obligations given INDIVIDUAL INEFFECTIVITY.

⁶ Attributions of obligations to groups that do not themselves constitute agents have typically taken this form, from Held (1970) and onwards (e.g. Schwenkenbecher 2014: 63–65); Wringe (2016) makes an explicit appeal to “moral phenomenology”.

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things-considered and pro tanto obligations. In what follows, I will therefore propose an explication of one sort of phenomenon that we have in mind when talking of obligations in moral contexts. The analysis of collective obligations that I propose based on this will then have to be modified to cover other kinds of moral obligations.

Abstractly, we can say that our obligations are what can be properly demanded of us; in the case of moral obligations, what can be properly morally demanded of us. (Analogously, our legal obligations are what can be legally demanded of us.) What can be morally demanded is a matter of what can be demanded on moral grounds, but demands come in different forms, where failures to satisfy the demand have different consequences. Generically, one must satisfy any moral ideal on pain of being morally non-ideal in the corresponding way. Certain more specific moral demands must be satisfied on pain of making one a fitting target of moral blame in the form of guilt (in the first-personal case) or indignation. (To the extent that such demands permit actions that are morally non-ideal, they allow for supererogatory actions: actions that are morally better than what is morally required.) Other demands still must be satisfied on pain of making one a fitting target of more hands-on sanctions or attempts to force us to comply than what is provided by basic expressions of negative reactive attitudes. (To the extent that such demands allow for acts that merit blame, they allow for suberogatory actions: actions that are permitted but still blameworthy.)

For convenience, my focus here will be on demands the violations of which ground blame. In understanding obligations as demands the violations of which ground blame, we can distinguish unconditional from various kinds of conditional grounding relations:

**UNCONDITIONAL GROUNDING:** If X has an obligation to φ, X would be morally to blame for not φ-ing.

**CONDITIONAL GROUNDING:** If X has an obligation to φ, X would be morally to blame for not φ-ing if … X could φ / X was, or could be, aware of the relevant moral considerations / X had sufficient control over φ-ing / there were no further countervailing moral considerations, etc.

Some of these different kinds of relations correspond at least roughly to familiar distinctions between obligations that are subjective (relative to the agent’s evidence about his circumstances) and objective (relative to the actual circumstances) as well as between all-things-considered and pro tanto obligations: X has an [objective / pro tanta] obligation to φ if and only if X would be to blame for not φ-ing if [X knew all relevant facts about the situation / X could φ and there were no stronger, countervailing, moral considerations].

To avoid ambiguities and simplify matters, focus here will be on a notion of moral obligation as an unconditional moral demand. For convenience, I will often talk of such obligations as (moral) requirements:

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7 There are more possibilities: demands that must be satisfied on pain of making one a fitting target of moral protest, where this need not involve moral indignation (Smith 2013), or on pain of not living up to a standard that should be actively encouraged, where encouragement is different from threats of blame or protest should one fall short, or on pain of not doing what an ideal moral advisor would want one to do in the circumstances.
REQUIREMENT: X is morally required to φ if and only if X would be to blame for not φ-ing.⁸

To further spell out what moral requirements are, we will be helped by an account of when one is to blame for not φ-ing. Ideally, such an account should explain a number of general facts about moral requirements. One is that someone is required to do something only if doing it is in some relevant sense under her control (“ought implies can”). Another is that requirements take a variety of objects, at least as far as ordinary moral thinking goes. We can of course be to blame for actions, but also for omissions, (lack of) cognitive and emotional reactions, and states of attention.

To account for these general facts, I follow a broadly Strawsonian (and increasingly influential) tradition of taking blameworthiness to be grounded in the agent’s “quality of will”:

QUALITY OF WILL: One is blameworthy insofar as the object of blame – what one is blamed for – is an “expression” of a bad quality of will (e.g. Strawson 1962; Arpaly 2006; McKenna 2012).

As this tradition has made clear, paradigmatic cases of blaming involve thinking that something bad happened because the agent did not care enough about the matters at hand. Conversely, we typically do not blame someone if we find out that they did it because of external forces or because they were ignorant of crucial information, where this does not reflect any lack of concern about the matters at hand.

Some precisifications and qualifications are in place, though.

First, there are various ways in which one might understand quality of will. I take it that blameworthiness is grounded in failures to care about certain things in the right way, where

CARING: To care about some object in some regard is to be disposed to notice factors relevant to how well it goes with it in that regard and to invest resources to promote it.

Quality of will accounts can accept this but differ in what objects one needs to care about for one’s will to be good: total wellbeing, justice, or one’s own happiness, relations, character, or avoidance of certain actions, to mention some possibilities.

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⁸ In rejecting something like REQUIREMENT, Michael Zimmerman (2008: 10) correctly points out that we often acknowledge blameless wrongdoing—blameless failures to discharge obligations—when the agent has some relevant excuse, perhaps involving ignorance or lack of control. But while wrongdoing and blameworthiness come apart for one notion of obligation and corresponding notion of wrongness, for another the kinds of ignorance and lack of control that remove one’s blameworthiness also remove the moral wrongness. For example, I find it natural to deny that someone did wrong in causing a risk for others if she did so because she blamelessly failed to combine information available to her. However, as excuses play no role in the discussion that follows, those who find the REQUIREMENT notion of obligations unintuitive can substitute a version that conditionalizes blame on relevant kind of control and understanding. For a version that conditionalizes blame on (instrumentally) rational control, see n. 17.
Second, not any non-ideal caring is bad or lacking in a way that grounds blame. We are not blameworthy for actions falling short of ideal virtue. Rather, the caring must fall below some relevant standard, with normative force to back up demands that agents satisfy it and blame when their behavior expresses substandard caring. Moreover, standards do not apply uniformly to all agents: indignation seems misplaced when directed at an agent who lacks the capacities required for caring about certain things—certain core elements of social and moral cognition, say—and to the extent that such capacities come in degrees, the relevant standards might vary accordingly. Furthermore, the degree of caring demanded by the standards will vary depending on the object of care, and might vary depending on one’s relation to that object.

Finally, not any event expressive of substandard caring is a relevant object of blame. The object of blame needs to itself be morally bad, i.e. of a kind that we have moral reason to prevent. For example, an agent might not be to blame for an expression of substandard caring about his father during free association therapy. Moreover, it needs to be explained in a normal way by the substandard caring, not through some random chain of events (Björnsson 2014: 114–15). The normal way in which substandard caring explains a bad event (action or outcome) is by ruling out appropriately caring in a situation where appropriate caring would have lead agents to notice if they were about to engage in behavior making that event possible and to refrain from that behavior.

The resulting version of the quality of will account is that

**BLAMEWORTHINESS**: $X$ is morally to blame for $Y$ if and only if $Y$ is morally bad and explained in a normal way by $X$’s substandard caring (Björnsson 2011; Forthcoming-a; Björnsson and Persson 2012).

From **REQUIREMENT** and **BLAMEWORTHINESS** it follows that $X$ is required to $\phi$ if and only if not $\phi$-ing is bad and $X$’s not $\phi$-ing would be explained, in a normal way, by $X$’s substandard caring. When is $X$’s not $\phi$-ing guaranteed to be so explained? Exactly when $X$’s caring appropriately would ensure, in a normal way, that $X \phi$. Hence:

**REQUIREMENTS AS ENSURED BY CARING (REC)**: $X$ is morally required to $\phi$ if and only if $X$’s not $\phi$-ing would be morally bad and $X$’s $\phi$-ing would be ensured, in a normal way, by $X$’s caring appropriately (Björnsson 2014; Björnsson and Brülde forthcoming; Björnsson 2014; Björnsson & Brülde 2015).  

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9 I leave open the nature of that normative force and of the corresponding demand that agents satisfy the standard. From the general quality of will approach it follows that one must live up to the standard on pain of being to blame for expressions of this failure. But one might think that one must live up to the standards on pain of being irrational, or of failing as a citizen of a kingdom of ends or the moral community, or of falling short of norms the social enforcement of which is supported by rationalistic, rule-consequentialist, virtue ethical, or intuitionistic justification, say. These variations should not matter for the purpose of this chapter.

10 Basic general obligations—as obligations to keep promises, treat people with respect, and obligations not to lie, steal, or kill, etc.—are naturally understood as *pro tanto* obligations and thus fall outside of...
Apart from capturing the connection between obligation and blame, REC straightforwardly accounts for the fact that one has an obligation (of the relevant sort) to φ only if φ-ing is under one’s control, as one must be in a position where caring appropriately ensures, in a normal way, that one φ. REC also leaves room for a wide variety of objects of obligations: That one cares appropriately can ensure that one acts or refrains from certain actions, but also that one notices certain things or has certain cognitive or emotional reactions. Moreover, what is ensured might involve a series of coordinated actions guided by an explicit intention, such as the act of *walking over to the stereo and turning down the volume*, as well as a series of separate and individually motivated actions and omissions that has an overall effect, such as the act of *letting the neighbor sleep through the night* by avoiding or aborting activities that make much noise throughout the night. It is also worth noting that REC allows for a variety of substantive views about the objects of appropriate caring, including both impersonal values (total happiness, justice, beauty) and agent-relative matters (not lying, not stealing, not killing, being a good human being, citizen, friend, parent, spouse, colleague).  

Return now to the difficulty of understanding obligations of groups that do not themselves constitute an agent. At a first glance, REC might seem to be of little help, as it requires that obligation bearers are subject to moral standards of caring, and as it is natural to think that such standards only apply to individual moral agents. On closer inspection, however, we can see how REC can be satisfied for some plural subjects:

First, and trivially, even if X is plural, X’s not φ-ing might be morally bad, i.e. the sort of thing that we have moral reasons to prevent: you might have moral reason to prevent a group of teenage yahoos from waking up your sweet elderly neighbor, or from abandoning a cat helplessly stuck in a tree after they chased it up there.

Second, and more interestingly, demands that agents care about something can unproblematically be directed at groups of agents, not just at individuals: I might demand of the group of teenagers that they care about the neighbor, or about the cat. Of course, on the assumption that only agents can satisfy or breach moral standards of caring, such a demand can only be understood distributively, as demanding that the members of the group care appropriately. But notice that something analogous holds for a corresponding demand directed at an individual agent—a demand that she cares about the neighbor, or the cat. Plausibly, since only an agent *at a time* can satisfy or breach the relevant standards, if this

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**REC’s scope.** Such obligations can instead be understood as demands that one care about (not) performing certain actions, with stringency dependent on the required degree of caring (or as a responsibility to care about this, in the terminology of Björnsson and Brülde forthcoming). So understood, they have consequences for particular obligations, as caring about (not) performing a certain action type can ensure that one does (not) perform a particular instance of it.

10 It also allows for various ways of motivating such substantive views: see n. 9.

**REC is structurally similar to virtue ethical identifications of right actions with actions performed by the virtuous (see e.g. Hursthouse 1999, ch. 2), though it is concern with duty rather than rightness, and appeals to appropriate caring rather than (presumably more demanding) virtue. For a brief discussion of how REC might handle some problems raised for such accounts, see Björnsson 2014: 116–17, n13.**
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demand concerns an agent during an extended period, it can only be understood distributively, as a demand that she care at the specific times of that period.

Third, appropriate caring by a group of agents can ensure, in normal ways, that the group acts in a certain way. If the teenagers care appropriately about the neighbor, this will ensure that each keeps calm in the proximity of her bedroom and that they thereby keep the noise they collectively make below a certain level. If they care appropriately about the cat, this might ensure, in normal ways, that they organize to help it down. Notice that whereas coordination might be essential in the second case, the first case is different. Here, as in countless other cases, appropriate caring avoids cumulative problems by separate efforts of a large number of individuals. Again, this is directly parallel to a typical individual case: it is not the teenager’s caring about the neighbor at one specific time that explains why the neighbor gets to sleep, but her caring throughout the night.12

In light of these considerations, it seems unproblematic and non-mysterious that the teenagers might have a moral obligation to help the cat down, or not keep the neighbor awake. It does not matter whether the teenagers constitute a rational agent, much less a fully-fledged moral agent. It also seems unproblematic that these obligations would be grounded at least partly in instrumentally based reasons: the obligations are grounded in the teenagers’ capacity to help the cat and not keep the neighbor awake, and in the value of the cat getting down safely from the tree and the neighbor getting her sleep.

For an obligation like this to obtain, fundamentally, for a number of agents to stand in a certain relation to each other and to φ-ing, not for one unified agent constituted by such a plurality to relate to φ-ing. I will thus call it a “shared” obligation.13 To see that such obligations are essentially shared, compare two cases where an individual teenager cannot help the cat down the tree because at least two people are required to erect the ladder and because there is no help to be had: in the first case because the other teenagers are unwilling to help; in the second because the teenager is there alone. In neither case does she have an individual obligation to help the cat—she cannot—but in the first, she might share an obligation with the others to do so. (The latter possibility also illustrates how shared obligations do not consist in individual obligations to achieve some end together with others.)

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12 One might worry in general whether the possibility of bringing about some important effect through a series of uncoordinated actions really provides the sort of control needed to ground obligation (Lawford-Smith 2015: 233–35; cf. Pinkert 2014; Schwenkenbecher 2014: 68–69). But notice that the effects by uncoordinated actions need not come about by chance: they are normal upshots of separate behaviors all guided by the value realized by the effect. (This is not to deny that there is an important difference between collective and individual versions of such cases. The mechanisms ensuring cross-temporal stability of caring in an individual might be stronger than whatever psychological, social, or biological mechanisms might ensure that enough individuals in a group care as required. This difference, however, is merely a matter of degree.)

13 Some discussions of obligations of groups that do not themselves constitute agents seem to take the subjects of obligations to be other than the members of the group: the group as a whole, say. I take this to be a central cause for concern about the reality of collective obligations, as witnessed by worries about agency and addressability (see e.g. Wringe 2010).
Thus far I have argued that on an independently motivated understanding of obligations, collective obligations of a certain kind—shared obligations—are entirely non-mysterious. But two questions remain to be answered, neither of which has an obvious answer:

How can COLLECTIVE EFFICACY ground COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION?

How can COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION ground RESULTING INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATION?

I address these questions in the following two sections.

3. Understanding COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION

It might seem that the proposed account of shared obligations applies straightforwardly to the case of COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION. According to REC, we are morally required to significantly reduce the threat of climate catastrophe insofar as our caring appropriately would ensure, in a normal way, that we do. It might seem plausible, on this conception, that we do have such an obligation. At least it might seem plausible if we assume, as I will here, that it can be properly demanded of us that we care about things threatened by climate change, in particular the weal and woe of people in areas most likely to be hit the hardest by flooding, drought, social unrest, disease, and war. Of course, the steps needed to radically transform our production and use of energy will have to change radically in a generation, demanding significant sacrifice from many people. But key technologies have developed swiftly even without costly measures, and more forceful policy changes would surely speed up the process. Given the magnitude of what is at stake, surely the required sacrifices can be demanded.

On reflection, though, things are less straightforward. Given how small an impact we can expect of individual agent’s actions on overall preventive success—given INDIVIDUAL INEFFICACY—it is unclear why the possibility of climate catastrophe would prompt even moderately costly action from individual agents who care appropriately. Moreover, even if it would prompt action, this is not enough to make sense of COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION, which says that our obligation derives from COLLECTIVE EFFICACY and the goal of significantly reducing climate threat. It is not obvious why the collective capacity to prevent catastrophe should motivate action from the individual who does not have the capacity to make a significant difference to collective preventive success. More needs to be said to make sense of the intuition behind COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION.

Start with the question of how the need to prevent climate catastrophe can give individuals instrumental moral reasons to act given that none of us will individually significantly reduce the threat. An obvious first answer is that although we are extremely unlikely to make a significant difference with respect to the grand outcome that is the object of COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION, the difference we can make is not thereby morally irrelevant. We might cut down on our carbon footprint, offset what remains, vote for politicians that support important climate legislation, support climate friendly technologies by our everyday choices, and help spread awareness of the risks and what needs to be done. Taking these steps, it seems, would likely make some contribution in positive direction. After all, whatever threat reduction is achieved will in significant part be achieved by a multitude of such steps. Given appropriate caring, this might motivate enough action to ensure significant overall reduction.
But perhaps this too exaggerates the role we can play as individuals. Consider the fact that many of the systems that we operate in have buffer zones, i.e. ranges within which differences in input values make no difference to the overall outcome. Voting is the most familiar example: unless an election is as close as can be, no one individual vote will make a difference as to who wins. The likelihood that my vote will make a difference in an election with many thousand or even millions of voters is thus typically vanishingly small, especially where reliable advance polling indicates a clear winner. But numerous natural and human systems display similar buffering, with corresponding effects on likelihoods: it might seem extremely unlikely that my emissions of greenhouse gases will cause minute increases in temperature or sea levels that in turn make a difference to the occurrence or extent of a drought or forest fire, to whether someone dies from dehydration or overheating, or to whether flood barriers resist the forces of waves. Moreover, it might seem that unless one’s actions make some concrete identifiable difference with respect to some value—harms an identifiable human being, say—that value cannot make performing or abstaining from these actions morally obligatory (Sinnott-Armstrong 2010: 337).

Of course, as many have pointed out, even unlikely outcomes matter if they are significant enough (e.g. Hiller 2011; Kagan 2011; Lawford-Smith 2016; Parfit 1984: 73–75; Singer 1980). Our decisions should arguably be guided by the effect of available alternatives on expected value (i.e. on the sum of the products of the value of each of the possible outcomes and their probability). Assuming that this is correct, suppose that the minute difference in greenhouse gases that I might affect has some non-zero likelihood of affecting the occurrence or extent of forest fires, droughts, or whether someone dies of dehydration or overheating, and so forth. Even if each such effect is extremely unlikely, there are plausibly a staggering number of possibilities for such effects, each individually of considerable importance. Moreover, unlike in cases of elections with reliable forecasts, it seems that individuals have no way of knowing whether they find themselves in buffer zones with respect to the vast majority of these possible effects. Given this, the difference in expected value that the individual can make by affecting his own or others’ greenhouse gas emissions might still be significant. Of course, in light of the vast complexities, any calculation of expected value will have to rely on reasonable heuristics. A first approximation might be to look at something like the projected average marginal contribution of a given amount of pollution in the range of sufficiently likely outcomes. We might then find that the expected negative value of an afternoon worth of gas guzzling joy riding is (very roughly) equivalent to that of ruining someone’s afternoon (cf. Hiller 2011: 355–61).

Still, one might think that because of the complexity and magnitude of the systems at work, no concrete harmful or beneficial effects can be traced back to an individual’s contribution such that this particular contribution can be said to be causally responsible for those effects (Maltais 2013; Sinnott-Armstrong 2010).

The problem here is not that we lack reason to think that an individual’s marginal contribution could make certain massive determinate differences (pace Maltais 2013: 592–94). After all, ordinary physical mechanisms are sensitive to minute changes, and often translate
minute differences in initial conditions to large differences downstream in ways that make many natural and social events virtually unpredictable.

But appeals to causal responsibility for harms encounter two other problems. The first is that the vast complexity of system, where the causal pre-history of events will involve great many causal factors, make it unclear on what ground a given event should be traced back to a particular individual’s actions. The second problem is that the consequences of our actions might be metaphysically indeterminate rather than merely in principle individually unknowable. One possibility would be that the laws of nature are indeterministic. Another is that the alternatives available to an agent might involve significant metaphysically indeterminacy. Consider the sort of counterfactuals that would pin a particular outcome to one individual’s contribution: if you offset your greenhouse gas emissions, [bad outcome, e.g. the flooding of someone’s cellar] is avoided; if you don’t, it isn’t. Arguably, the antecedents of such conditionals typically fall short of identifying an exact and comprehensive physical state of the world. For example, there are many concrete ways in which you could make true that you offset your greenhouse gas emissions, differing in various ways at both macro and micro physical levels, and it is unclear what would make it determinately true of one of these ways that if you did offsetting, you would do it in that way. But without such determinacy, any consequences flowing from chaotic systems—systems which outputs are highly sensitive to minute input differences—will be correspondingly indeterminate, even assuming that the universe operates on deterministic principles.

If only the likelihood of concrete, identifiable harmful or beneficial consequences of action were relevant for decision-making, indeterminacy of consequences could thus undermine duties to reduce one’s own carbon footprint or to otherwise contribute to prevention. On reflection, however, such consequences are just not required for decision-making relevance, as illustrated by:

*Carcinogen:* It is in your power to determine whether the US population (324 million) will be exposed to a carcinogen known to cause a certain form of lung cancer. If we look at the group of about 10 million people that likely have the gene in virtue of which they risk developing and dying from that form of cancer, exposure increases the average risk from 50% to 52%, depending in each individual case on numerous factors and indeterministic processes. The expected number of lung cancer deaths is thus 200 000 higher given exposure.

The difference in expected value between the alternatives seems to provide very strong reason not to expose people to the carcinogen, and indeed ground a moral obligation not to do so. (At least it seems to ground such an obligation if we assume that there are no extremely strong contrary reasons.) What is not clear, however, is that you would cause the death of or in concrete ways harm anyone identifiable if you did expose people to the carcinogen. Suppose

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14 One might think that appeals to shared or joint responsibility might help here (perhaps along the lines of Björnsson 2011), but as I will stress below, mere causal contribution itself lacks normative significance.
that you did and that, as expected, roughly 5.2 million people in the group died from lung cancer. Since each of them would on average have had only a 50% chance of avoiding that fate without exposure, we cannot say of any of them that they would have been better off without it, only that they might have been. Similarly if you decided against exposure and roughly 5 million people in the group died from lung cancer: we could not say of the people not dying from lung cancer that they would have been worse off if you had allowed exposure, only that they might have been. Consequently, your obligation not to expose people to the carcinogen is not grounded in a requirement to avoid identifiable harm (unless increasing the risk of harm itself constitutes a harm).\(^\text{15}\)

Much more can be said, both about empirical issues and about their relevance for individual obligations. But I take these considerations to indicate that if everyone cared appropriately, a great many of us would recognize teleological reasons to take action, reasons that grounding obligations to take at least some action. Countervailing reasons related to any sacrifice of personal wellbeing involved will be low for many such actions, such as staying somewhat informed, raising awareness, ranking climate policy as particularly important when casting votes in close elections, offsetting one’s carbon emissions, and choosing the climate friendly alternative when options are otherwise roughly equivalent. For most people in the affluent world, performing such actions out of caring about the outcomes would impose limited material hardships and might well involve positive effects on happiness characteristic of involvement in altruistic causes.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Whether increasing the risk that someone is harmed or lowering someone’s expected wellbeing itself constitutes harm, or perhaps more weakly injustice, might matter for the strength of the resulting individual obligations. If avoiding carbon emissions is merely a matter of improving the state of the world, one might think that there are more effective allocations of the resources one would spend: malaria prevention, say. But if it is instead a matter of avoiding the violation of negative duties not to harm or commit injustice, it might trump positive duties to do good (see Broome 2012, ch. 4–5). For the issue that we are currently considering—what individuals would do on the assumption that all cared appropriately—this might not matter much, however: the marginal expected value of support for what currently yields most good per dollar would likely quickly go down with enough contributions, leaving enough resources to cut net carbon emissions.

Even if increased risk for harm or lowered expected value for individuals can be relevant for action, one might think that such relevance requires substantially increased risk or lowered expected value for those individuals, even if involving a vast number of individuals. (Cf. Julia Nefsky’s (2011) argument that minor differences in the distribution of goods might be taken not to make a difference as to whether the distribution is fair or not.) Contrary to this, I believe that variations on cases like Carcinogen help bring out that small differences in the dimensions that ground large relevant differences are themselves morally relevant, albeit typically negligible unless affecting a large number of people. (Constraints on space prevents further discussion.)

\(^{16}\) How much one will do if caring appropriately will obviously depend on one’s resources and other concerns, as well as on how much one can be required to care, which in turn might depend on one’s relative capacity to contribute, one’s relative cost for contributing, one’s degree of (retrospective) responsibility for the situation, and so forth (for a catalogue of possible factors, see Björnsson and Brülde forthcoming).
What all this might show is that, given REC, we have a shared obligation to significantly reduce climate threat: if we cared appropriately, this could well ensure such reduction in normal ways. Even if this is correct, however, it does not yet help us understand COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION. For according to COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION, our shared obligation is grounded in our collective efficacy with respect to the goal of preventing climate catastrophe. The considerations of efficacy just mentioned concern individual efficacy with respect to less prominent climate related ends than that of significantly reducing the threat of overall catastrophe. Some other explanation is required if we are to make sense of the perspective captured by COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION—a perspective that motivates many activists.

One might think that such an explanation is provided by:

MERE CONTRIBUTION: If you care appropriately about some important end and think that actions by a group of people can accomplish that end, you care about being part of attempts to accomplish it even if you will not thereby make a significant difference to the success of the endeavor.

Given MERE CONTRIBUTION, appropriately caring individuals would contribute to threat reduction given the likelihood of a collective effort, and would do so because of the collective capacity to achieve the end. (An individual action that did not meaningfully affect the likelihood of successful prevention might still have contributed to that end in the sense that it was (an intended) part of how the end was accomplished: it was accomplished by billions of actions of the relevant kind.) But while I will suggest that something in the neighborhood is correct, MERE CONTRIBUTION clearly is not. One sort of worry concerns cases where it is clear that no attempt will in fact succeed because others care too little. This matters less here: the current

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17 I’ve suggested that people who care appropriately would take individual steps that would be jointly sufficient for significant threat reduction (typically through various forms of collective actions). But this might be resisted on the ground that even people who care about the threatening effects of climate change might fail to draw the conclusion that individuals have considerable reason to contribute. After all, as we have seen, a number of philosophers reject that conclusion, and it could well be that a many of us draw the same conclusion. If this group is large enough, appropriate caring might not ensure enough action to significantly prevent catastrophic climate change, thus seemingly undermining the idea that prevention is a shared obligation.

One response to this worry is to say that the relevant standards for caring require caring about the expected value of one’s actions, independent of identifiable concrete harm or benefits resulting from these actions. On this view, those failing to contribute because they take their inaction to cause no identifiable harm would be morally to blame. Another response is to accept that the worry might indeed undermine shared obligations of the REC variety and instead say that it is instrumental rationality that requires giving weight to expected value, not morality. Based on this, one could then say we have a shared obligation under the following, REC-related, notion of obligation:

REC*: X is morally required to \( \phi \) if and only if X’s not \( \phi \)-ing would be morally bad and X’s \( \phi \)-ing would be ensured, in a normal way, by X’s caring appropriately and being teleologically rational.

18 For considerations that might seem to motivate CONTRIBUTION, see Brennan and Sayre-McCord 2015: 53–54.
question is what role collective efficacy might play in ensuring that if everyone cared appropriately, the threat of climate catastrophe would be significantly reduced. The major problem is that mere contribution seems to count for nil. Consider:

*Unhelpful Contribution:* You have just learned that two of your colleagues have stumbled upon very strong but complex evidence of the innocence of a man about to be executed. They have already worked 40 hours almost without breaks and now plan on spending the night collating the information, as its needs to be with the Governor first thing in the morning if the man is to be saved. You can contribute by doing some of the collating, but this would make the overall effort to save the man marginally worse. It would ever so slightly increase your colleagues’ efforts, as you would need detailed instructions, or ever so slightly decrease the chance of success.

In this case, if you care about the success of the effort and those involved and if there is no other reason for you to contribute than the fact that you would contribute, you should not get involved. Moreover, no matter how marginal the negative effect would be of getting involved, it does not seem to be counteracted by the value of your participation. The most straightforward explanation for this is that your participation itself has no value.\(^\text{19}\)

If you decided to contribute in *Unhelpful Contribution*, this would do nothing to increase the likelihood of achieving the goal, but it would count as a *contribution* towards that goal and might have been guided by the projected success of the collective endeavor. The possibility of such contributions, I think, is key to understanding how the collective capacity to achieve an end matters in motivating individuals and in reinforcing the sense that appropriate caring would ensure prevention. Consider:

*Helpful Contribution:* As in *Unhelpful Contribution*, your colleagues plan on spending one last excruciating night collating information that can save an innocent man from being executed. Again you can contribute, but this time doing so would make the effort better. Perhaps you cannot meaningfully affect the likelihood of success, but you are a far better typist than your colleagues and have not suffered through 40 hours straight of hard work, and the instructions needed are simple. If you joined in, you would be tired tomorrow and late answering some emails, but the work would get done much faster and your colleagues could get some much-needed sleep.

Here is an intelligible possibility: You decide to help write the report, not because this increases the chance that an innocent man would be saved, but because it decreases your colleagues’ physiological burden by reducing their extreme workload and removing the psychological or social burden of being alone with a difficult task. Nevertheless, your actions are aimed at saving him and rely on belief in your collective ability to do so: the innocent

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\(^{19}\) Cf. Dietz 2016: 974–75. One might worry that the reason you should not intervene is that you have no special reason to care about this man. But consider a variation of *Unhelpful Contribution* where you bear some responsibility for the death sentence and so are required to care considerably about saving him. Arguably, you should still refrain from contributing. Your mere contribution is adding nothing.
man’s predicament provide crucial teleological direction for your actions, and you would not have joined in without thinking that you and your colleagues might be able to prevent the execution. The same phenomenon can be illustrated by a case involving only one individual:

**Laundry**: On a Saturday afternoon, you decide to do laundry. You need your clothes cleaned before your Monday trip and would like to have Sunday free for writing. You do not think of your decision as significantly increasing the chances of doing laundry before Monday—you would get it done on Sunday if it still needed doing. Nevertheless, your action is centrally oriented by the goal of having clean clothes for the trip and your sense that you can achieve that goal.

Both *Laundry* and the possible interpretation of *Helpful Contribution* illustrate the following general idea:

**MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION**: One can meaningfully contribute towards the achievement of a goal even if it does not significantly increase the likelihood of success, as long as one thinks that the goal might be achieved and the contribution makes the effort of achieving it better in some way: easier, faster, cheaper, more compatible with other important goals, involving a fairer or otherwise superior distribution of efforts, and so forth.

The suggestion now is that **MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION** lets us explain how the shared obligation to prevent climate catastrophe can be grounded in our collective ability to do so. In line with REC, it does so by explaining how that collective ability will figure in what motivates appropriately caring individuals given some intuitively appealing assumptions about what agents are required to care about.

The proposed explanation is this: Caring appropriately involves not only a concern with the chances of preventive success. It also involves a concern with the quality of the collective effort of achieving it, a concern guided by our sense that success of the collective effort is possible. Affluent individuals, such as the middle and upper classes of wealthier countries, could make the overall effort fairer by contributing in relation to how their resources exceed what is needed for a decent life. Moreover, given that we all cared appropriately, many who could not themselves significantly affect the likelihood of preventive success would be in position to provide meaningful support to people who could—leaders of nations, political parties, organizations, scientists, and so forth—or support to others providing such support. The support could come in the form of psychological or moral support, help in spreading the word, monetary contributions, or support of emerging technologies as an early adopter. Even small amounts of such support can provide encouragement that significantly improves the situation for those who can affect the likelihood of success.

The reasons provided by the possibility of improving the quality of the effort in these ways is certainly much weaker than what would be provided if individuals could significantly affect the likelihood of success. But given that individuals also have reasons to contribute based on the difference their individual contributions make to expected value, the reasons in line with **MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION** need not themselves be very strong. To help make
sense of COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION, it is enough that they play a significant role in motivating individuals who care appropriately about the outcome and the quality of the effort to achieve it.20

This way of making sense of COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION and how it is grounded in COLLECTIVE EFFICACY relies on assumptions about what would motivate us if we cared appropriately, and I do not have space here to provide an argument for these assumptions apart from pointing to their intuitive appeal. Showing that COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION is correct would require a more thorough defense. For the purpose of explaining why COLLECTIVE OBLIGATION itself is intuitively appealing and intelligible, however, intuitively appealing assumptions should be enough.

4. Understanding RESULTING INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATION

Suppose that the argument thus far is correct. Then we can make good sense of the idea that our collective capacity to significantly reduce the risk or extent of climate catastrophe grounds a shared obligation to do so. If we all cared appropriately about the difference that our own contributions might make and about improving the preventive efforts in other ways, this would likely ensure significant threat reduction.

How, though, can the existence of a shared obligation so conceived ground individual obligations to contribute to the shared effort, as required by RESULTING INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATION? As outlined above, individual agents’ reasons stemming from MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION are not obviously grounded in a shared obligation, as opposed to in the collective efficacy and likely success of the important task at hand. Moreover, it has been claimed that obligations for unstructured groups of the sort discussed here have no normative force or relevance beyond that of individual member obligations (e.g. Collins 2012; Lawford-Smith 2015).

The basic explanation of how shared obligations can ground individual obligations is that obligations, shared or individual, have normative force. If it is someone’s obligation to φ, this makes available, in principle if not in practice, a particular way of bringing about that she φ: by appealing to the facts that make it an obligation and gives obligations their normative force. (These facts include whatever reasons underpin the standard of caring that grounds the obligation—the importance of the values at stake, say, and the agent’s capacity to care for them—as well as the facts about the situation that one would be moved by given such caring.) The possibility of influencing action through an open appeal to facts grounding an obligation and its normative force matters, because unlike many other forms of influence, such an appeal is particularly...

20 Given that COLLECTIVE EFFICACY plays a role in motivating individuals who care appropriately via MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION, these individuals might see actions of their own that increase expected value with respect to climate related harms as contributing to a better collective effort. After all, even if the individual contribution is not seen as making a difference between significant and insignificant threat reduction, it marginally decreases the threat. However, although seeing their individual contribution in this light depends on accepting COLLECTIVE EFFICACY, this does not mean that the weight of the reasons provided by the individual capacity to increase expected value depends on accepting COLLECTIVE EFFICACY.
suited to avoid worries of being manipulative or coercive. If it is morally important that she $\phi$, in the sense that we are required to care about whether she $\phi$s, the availability of such a means might be what makes it our obligation to try to bring about that she $\phi$s, by providing us with morally acceptable or superior means to do so.

What goes for individual obligations goes for shared obligations. If we share an obligation to prevent climate catastrophe, prevention might be ensured by an appeal to whatever facts ground our shared obligation. (If preventing catastrophe was morally supererogatory, such reasons would not exist.) The availability of this means of affecting our actions might now ground obligations to use it on part of those who are required to care about preventive success. Such derived obligations might fall on the same obligation bearer as the original obligation: in virtue of our obligation to prevent climate catastrophe, we might have an obligation to remind ourselves of the facts grounding that obligation, including the magnitude of what is at stake and how prevention depends on people caring enough about this. But such an obligation might also fall on a subgroup or on individual members who are well placed to make the appeal, or on outsiders. Members are in a particularly good position to provide force to the appeal as they are parties of the shared obligation. They can show that they take the reasons they appeal to seriously by making other contributions to preventative efforts, contributions already supported by (obligating) reasons because of their marginal effect on expected preventive outcomes or qualitative improvement of preventive efforts. Moreover, the possibility of effectively and openly communicating the importance of what is at stake by highlighting the facts grounding our individual obligations and contributing in line with these reasons provides additional reason for these other contributions.

The suggestion now is that this role for facts that ground obligations lets us make sense of RESULTING INDIVIDUAL OBLIGATION. Because such facts ground valid moral demands, their existence is essential to a normatively special way of ensuring that the obligation is discharged.

This suggestion might raise the following worry: Individual obligations based in this way on the shared preventive obligation seem to depend not only on the existence of that shared obligation, but also on the likelihood or chance of significant threat reduction. It is unclear why individuals would have obligations to appeal to facts that ground shared obligations unless (a) doing so would at least marginally improve the expected degree of threat reduction or (b) the extent of the overall success is sufficient for such an appeal to constitute a meaningfully contribution to an obligatory effort (in line with MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION). Such assumptions might seem implausibly optimistic given how politicians and corporations have been dragging their feet. But this worry is exaggerated. Though it looks highly likely that we will fall far short of ideal goals, it also seems quite possible (and even quite likely) both that individuals can affect marginal expected preventive success and that the accumulated efforts of human beings in introducing regulations and supporting innovation, investments in emission reducing technologies, and so forth, will very significantly reduce the threat.

This concludes my attempt to make sense of central aspects of what I take to be the typical activist’s perspective on our climate obligations. In section 2, I explained why there need be nothing inherently mysterious about shared obligations. In section 3, I argued that we likely have a shared obligation to prevent climate catastrophe, an obligation based in part on
the recognition that we are able to do so. In this section, finally, I have argued that the existence of this shared obligation can further ground individual obligations to contribute, going beyond the sources of obligations discussed in section 3. If the arguments are correct, the activist’s perspective thus remains a reasonable one in spite of the size and complex nature of the threat at hand.

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