

# Climate Ethics:

## Individual vs. Collective Responsibility and the Problem of Corruption

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**Abstract:** Anthropogenic climate change (ACC) has been described as a tragedy of the commons (T of C) by Baylor Johnson. Johnson argues that solutions to T of C scenarios reside in collective action rather than individual action, and that our moral obligation is to advocate for collective solutions to ACC. Marion Hourdequin argues that individual action can serve to promote collective action and in doing so it can also serve as an ethical obligation. I contend that individual action holds intrinsic value in lieu of its ability to counteract our susceptibility to the kind of moral corruption espoused by Stephen Gardiner.

The endeavor to provide substantive solutions to the crisis of anthropogenic climate change (ACC) is riddled with many and varying difficulties. At the very least there exist practical, logistical, theoretical, and philosophical obstacles that we as a people (both nationally and globally) must traverse before a real resolution to our collective predicament can be found. I choose now to focus on the philosophical hurdles, specifically the moral and ethical issues preventing us from achieving a solution to our climate troubles. Those who agree that a climate crisis exists and that action must be taken are faced with the problem of deciding exactly where their ethical obligations reside. I now understand, to some extent, the impact that greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions have on the environment. Should I not now restrict my own emissions so as to limit my personal contribution to ACC? Baylor Johnson argues that such views are fundamentally mistaken in his essay “Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons.” The problem of ACC, according to Johnson, is symptomatic of a tragedy of the commons, or a collective action problem. A tragedy of the commons (T of C) scenario is resolved not by “acting unilaterally,” but by “acting as one of many in a cooperative scheme to address [the] problem.”<sup>1</sup> I will argue that Johnson’s view is potentially problematic because it makes a hierarchical distinction between unilateral actions and collective actions, and characterizes the former as inconsequential when done in isolation. With help derived from the work of Marion Hourdequin, I will argue that unilateral actions, even in isolation, are essential to solving the climate problem and should not be discounted.

I will begin by explaining Johnson’s argument. As stated above, Johnson claims that the climate problem is essentially a T of C. The basic structure of a T of C is grounded in three central premises. Hourdequin provides an excellent

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<sup>1</sup> Baylor Johnson, “Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons,” *Environmental Values* 12, no. 3 (2003): 272.



reiteration of Johnson's original explication of the premises, which accurately serves our purposes:

1. The only incentive players have is to maximise [their individual] benefits from use of the commons.
2. The only way players can communicate is by increasing or reducing use of the commons.
3. Use of the commons is shared, [however not all costs and benefits associated with use are shared.] Therefore:
  - a. *Costs (to the commons) of increased use* are shared, but *benefits from increased use* accrue to the individual . . .
  - b. *Benefits (to the commons) of reduced use* are shared, but *costs of reduced use* are borne by the individual . . .
  - c. Resources saved by one individual are available for use by any other user.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson states that "a T of C occurs when many *independent* agents derive benefits from a *subtractable* resource that is threatened by their *aggregate* use."<sup>2</sup> We can think of the atmosphere as a commons resource, the utilization of which consists of emitting GHGs for some benefit. There is a limit to the amount of aggregate GHG emissions the atmosphere can withstand before ACC begins to occur. Past this threshold point, we can say that the commons resource is being overused and the resulting ACC threatens the commons itself. It is important to note that individual GHG emissions result in no change in global temperature or in the occurrence of ACC. Rather, it is everyone's emissions combined that causes the harm resulting from ACC. When we combine the excessive use of the atmospheric commons, the absence of harm associated with individual actions, and the three premises outlined above, we can see that a T of C scenario obtains.

From here Johnson goes on to conclude that unilateral actions, which are individual actions not coordinated with some collective effort, are "ineffective in averting a T of C."<sup>3</sup> In our specific case, the unilateral actions are reductions in GHG emissions, and henceforth I will refer to these actions as unilateral reductions. Johnson's conclusion is grounded upon the idea that unilateral reductions without collective agreement will result in no alteration toward whether ACC will or will not occur. In order to prevent ACC, we must either prevent the T of C from obtaining or break out of it once it has obtained. Unilateral reductions lack the ability to do either, according to Johnson. In a T of C scenario, if an individual reduced his/her GHG emissions absent a collective agreement, then according to premise 2 and premise 3c above, that reduction would communicate to other individuals that additional resources are available for use. Consequently, according to premise 1, other individuals would be motivated to make use of the available resources for their personal benefit. Each individual who chooses to make use of the commons in such a way would be making the individually rational

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, 273.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

choice, given the parameters of the T of C scenario. There are no assurances that any unilateral reductions will be mirrored by other unilateral reductions. Thus, any unilateral reduction will result in no change to the amount of GHG emissions made in aggregate, and so ACC remains inevitable.

Since unilateral reductions do not suffice as a means of averting ACC, the solution must reside in some other action. For Johnson, the solution is “to work for a collective agreement that could avert a potential T of C.”<sup>4</sup> Once a collective agreement is established, it will bind everyone’s actions and ensure that each individual will reduce their GHG emissions to sustainable levels or suffer possible repercussions and sanctions. Once this happens, the T of C is no longer in effect, and the commons will no longer suffer from overuse. Consequently, Johnson argues that advocacy for collective agreement is the primary ethical obligation for individuals if they seek to avert ACC. It is worth noting that Johnson seems to endorse a consequentialist moral theory that determines moral duties by reference to the success of their outcomes. In this sense, success is determined by avoidance of negative consequences, or promotion of overall utility.

Marion Hourdequin has advanced two arguments that challenge Johnson’s claims of the limited ability of unilateral reductions. The first argument Hourdequin gives is the integrity argument, which aims mostly at invalidating Johnson’s first premise.<sup>5</sup> According to Hourdequin, the principle of integrity can provide an alternate motivation for individual agents. Hourdequin initially calls the obligation for moral integrity “an obligation to avoid hypocrisy.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of explaining the obligation with the negative connotation that hypocrisy implies, Hourdequin espouses a positive virtue of integrity that one should strive toward as an obligation. According to Hourdequin, integrity involves the idea of integrality, which is the internalizing of particular commitments which then become essential to the individual’s identity. If a commitment is integral to an individual, then that commitment should be compatible or “*well integrated*” with other commitments the individual holds.<sup>7</sup> So in the case of integrity with respect to addressing the climate problem, one must not only advocate for some collective agreement, but must “act also on a personal level to reduce her own emissions.”<sup>8</sup>

Hourdequin’s second argument is centered on an espousal of a Confucian interpretation of identity, which challenges Johnson’s second premise. According to Hourdequin, “Confucian philosophy does not understand the individual as an isolated, rational actor,” but rather as an entirely social being.<sup>9</sup> Thus, an individual’s identity is a conglomeration of all

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>5</sup> Hourdequin also provides a brief explanation for how the integrity argument can counteract Johnson’s second premise, but I choose to disregard that facet of the integrity argument. The reason I do so is because Hourdequin’s Confucian argument does a more thorough job of invalidating Johnson’s second premise, while her integrity argument neatly challenges the first.

<sup>6</sup> Hourdequin, 448.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 449.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 452.



the social interactions and relationships that individual holds. If an individual can be interpreted in this manner, then any or all unilateral actions made by an individual can influence others within a shared social contact. Further, such an individual learns about moral and ethical actions and behaviors through observation and interaction with surrounding people. In this sense, the Confucian interpretation of the self can effectively nullify the restrictions in communication inherent in the T of C framework.

In response to these arguments, Johnson, in a later work, altered some of his views on the importance of unilateral actions. Most importantly, Johnson now agrees that “unilateral reductions can be valuable” insofar as they complement and support the call for collective action and agreement.<sup>10</sup> This is an important reevaluation, because it concedes the fact that unilateral actions have a communicative property such that they can help to influence the behavior or views of others. Though Johnson does make this concession, he states that we must clearly distinguish “unilateral reductions *in isolation* from unilateral reductions *in combination* with a richer strategy for communication.”<sup>11</sup> In essence, Johnson says that the value in unilateral reductions resides in their ability to combine with and promote the social advocacy for collective agreement. But, when unilateral reductions are done in isolation and communicate no morally salient ideas to others, then they continue to be morally neutral or inconsequential. Finally, Johnson also makes a hierarchical distinction between the two forms of action. Advocacy of collective action, insofar as it is the primary means of effecting change, continues to hold precedence over any communicative unilateral reductions.

Hourdequin issues a reply to Johnson that primarily argues against the hierarchical distinction Johnson makes between unilateral reductions and the advocacy of collective action. She argues for the increased importance that must be placed on unilateral reductions. Hourdequin emphasizes that “*individual emissions reductions can themselves contribute to the generation and stabilization of effective collective schemes*” and as such, the distinction between the two is not at all decisive.<sup>12</sup> In response to the distinction between unilateral reductions done in isolation and those made with the intent to complement social advocacy, she says that “barring an unusual degree of isolation from others, very few ‘unilateral reductions’ will be truly private.”<sup>13</sup> In essence, her argument against this distinction is simply to say that most acts of unilateral reduction are not entirely isolated. However, it is important to note that Hourdequin does not provide a clear and salient argument for the importance of unilateral reductions even in complete isolation. Even though she may not espouse any clear argument in her response to Johnson, perhaps we may look back to her argument on integrity in order to facilitate the creation of such an argument. For instance, she could perhaps pin the importance of

<sup>10</sup> Baylor Johnson, “The Possibility of a Joint Communiqué: My Response to Hourdequin,” *Environmental Values* 20, no. 2 (2011): 150.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>12</sup> Marion Hourdequin, “Climate Change and Individual Responsibility: A Reply to Johnson,” *Environmental Values* 20, no. 2 (2011): 162.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

unilateral reductions in isolation upon the moral importance of maintaining integrity and avoiding hypocrisy.

If we are to show the importance of unilateral reduction in isolation, our argument cannot depend on challenging Johnson's second premise, that of communication. Rather, integrity must be something that is morally significant in its own right regardless of its influence on others. This is exactly what Hourdequin does when she describes the positive connotations of the obligation of moral integrity. If I am truly committed to addressing the climate problem, I must make my commitment integral to who I am as a person, and my commitment must be integrated into all of my activities so as not to create conflict among my actions. So, if I value integrity, then I must value the personal commitment of unilaterally reducing my emissions even in isolation. This seems rather straightforward. But there is a problem: what Hourdequin merely provides is a contrary principle to challenge Johnson's principle of self-interest. Her argument is to pose an alternative principle and espouse its qualities and hope that in doing so it will prove to be more of an incentive than self-interest and personal utility. This form of argumentation does not establish in a compelling fashion why we should adopt integrity over self-interest. But I believe there is a different road to be taken.

Hourdequin originally classified the obligation of moral integrity as an obligation to avoid hypocrisy. She chose not to pursue this obligation because of its negative connotation. However, I believe that a very strong argument resides down this path. When we view someone as being hypocritical, we often make moral judgments about their hypocrisy. When we judge a person as being hypocritical, we are saying that the person has made some mistake or contradiction in their behavior, and as such they are subject to moral reprobation. When a person advocates for collective action to solve our climate problems by restricting everyone's GHG emissions to sustainable levels, and while doing so continues to emit in a wanton fashion, we judge this person negatively. Yet the problem here is much more disconcerting than a mere negative moral judging.

Stephen Gardiner in his work "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics, and the Problem of Corruption" argued for what he referred to as a "distinct problem for ethical action on climate change."<sup>14</sup> This problem was that of moral corruption. Gardiner believed that ACC posed such a unique problem that there were many facets of difficulties that had to be solved before a solution could be found. The culmination of all of these factors led Gardiner to describe "Climate change [as] a perfect moral storm."<sup>15</sup> The meaning behind this categorization is that the large problems surrounding ACC "exacerbate and obscure a lurking problem of moral corruption."<sup>16</sup> This moral corruption makes us susceptible to distraction, complacency, self-deception, selective-attentiveness, and hypocrisy. All these

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Gardiner, "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption," in *Climate Ethics*, ed. Stephen M. Gardiner, Simon Caney, Dale Jamieson, and Henry Shue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 94.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



things work towards preventing action and resolution to the climate change problem. If we categorize the hypocrisy inherent in Johnson's argument as being linked to moral corruption then we can begin to espouse an argument against him that is perhaps stronger than integrity alone. If Gardiner is right and moral corruption of this sort inhibits successful solutions to the climate crisis, then holding such a hypocritical view will not easily lead to successful implementation of collective action. We cannot truly expect to efficiently and successfully advocate for collective action when we ourselves are hindered by moral corruption such that we do not incorporate the actions we advocate into our behavior. It does not matter whether the hypocrisy is a result of moral corruption or not, it still results in the propagation or continuation of moral corruption. If this moral corruption prevents or even inhibits the successful advocacy of collective action, then Johnson's consequentialist argument falls apart.

As I have mentioned above, Johnson's argument hinges upon a consequentialist framework wherein moral obligations coincide with actions that serve to promote overall utility. Johnson believes that collective action is hierarchically superior to unilateral reductions because collective action serves to avert ACC by preventing or defeating a T of C scenario, whereas unilateral reductions lack this capability. However, when we take into account the moral corruption espoused by Gardiner, we can see that any collective action that is bereft of unilateral reductions is insufficient in regards to effecting a successful solution. If this is so, then it would seem that any hierarchical distinction between collective actions and unilateral reductions is patently mistaken. For it would seem that both collective actions and unilateral reductions are necessary for the successful resolution to a T of C. If this is the case, then Johnson must either relent to the equal importance of unilateral reductions or abandon his consequentialist framework.

In summation, there is significant moral value in an act of unilateral reduction in isolation. This value lies in solidifying and unifying our moral obligations, both collective and unilateral, to address ACC. In doing so, we will have taken the initial steps necessary in order to nullify the looming threat of moral corruption. It is my hope that taking these steps will eventually result in a more efficient and pervasive collective agreement that is uninhibited by our invariable susceptibility to moral corruption. A strong and equal emphasis must be placed on both collective action and unilateral reduction in order to defeat this T of C scenario and resolve our climate troubles. Any hierarchy placing one set of actions above the other will insufficiently preclude the possibility of moral corruption and only hinder our efforts for a climate resolution. It is not enough to promote unilateral reductions based upon their communicative properties. There is value in the integrity established by unilateral reductions regardless of isolation. Nor is it enough to promote only collective action while failing to ingrain within ourselves the beliefs inherent in such advocacy. If we are to truly seek a path leading to the resolution of our current climate dilemma, we must proceed forward as individuals and as a collective with the full commitment to strive toward a future unhindered by the shadow of

moral corruption and the contingent repercussions of anthropogenic climate change. ❖



