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Going Fossil Free: A Lesson in Climate Activism and Collective Responsibility

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Abstract Colleges and universities already contribute significantly to the fight against climate change, but the UN has recently called upon them to do even more. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that institutions of higher education play a unique role in combatting climate change and other structural injustices, not only by conducting research and disseminating knowledge, but also by fostering a form of collective political responsibility. A philosophical analysis of different forms of collective responsibility, with specific attention to the Fossil Free divestment movement, reveals how social position facilitates this contribution more so in colleges than in other institutions.

Keywords Climate change, collective responsibility, fossil fuel divestment, student activism

I. Introduction

Colleges and universities¹ already contribute significantly to the fight against climate change. Researchers from a wide range of disciplines identify causes, effects, and possible solutions to the challenges posed by a warming planet. Scholars share the knowledge gained through such work with each other, their students, and the public. Yet the United Nations (UN) has called upon colleges to do even more.

The 21st Conference of the Parties (COP 21) in Paris reached a monumental global commitment of 195 nations to tackle climate change. Article 12 of this Paris agreement explicitly states:

Parties shall cooperate in taking measures, as appropriate, to enhance climate change education, training, public awareness, public participation and public access to information, recognizing the importance of these steps with respect to enhancing actions under this Agreement (UNFCCC 2015).

¹ Throughout this article, these two words will be used interchangeably.

² Perhaps Basken's focus on the hard sciences is too limited. Other fields, such as philosophy, may

This charge is not new. The UN created the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) in anticipation of COP 20. HESI also called for improvements in teaching, research, engagement, local efforts at universities, and information sharing (Sustainable Development.org). And in fact, an appeal to educational institutions can be found as far back as “Our Common Future,” the report that led to the establishment of the first Earth Summit in Rio 1992 (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Universities are the world’s best centers for research and knowledge production. Why do so many external to academia deem it necessary to encourage them to contribute more to fighting one of the gravest challenges? Shouldn’t internal motivation drive such research?

Perhaps structural limitations within academia itself discourage this work. Scholars lack incentive to conduct serious research on the deeper social roots of climate change – for instance, research on the political implication of climate science or corporate influence on public opinion – since this type of work is more difficult to publish than research represented with quantitative modeling (Basken 2016).² The call for greater action may aim to deconstruct these limitations, and to open up new venues and incentives for such research. However, the possibilities for how colleges can engage with these issues is not exhausted by research, publishing, information sharing, teaching, and community outreach. Colleges offer fertile grounds for activist movements.

Recently over 800 independently operated chapters of the Fossil Free divestment movement have sprung up across the world, many on college campuses (FossilFree.org). Students, faculty, staff, and community members have launched campaigns to rid endowments of fossil fuel holdings. Some demonstrations, involving sit-ins, protests, arrests, and more have received a great deal of attention in the press. At COP 21 the Fossil Free campaign announced over \$3.4 trillion had been divested (350.org), and this number has continued to grow.

Institutes of higher learning have long been a center for many movements; for instance, civil rights, anti-capitalism, anti-war, apartheid, and anti-sweatshop. Recently, they have turned their attention to issues such as police violence and fossil fuel holdings. These issues all have something in common: the individual college or institution cannot improve much by acting on its own. In other words, these issues invoke collective responsibility – a philosophically contentious subject – because they arise from collective action. Such problems require a collective rather than a private response since they do not arise from individual behavior, but from the social structures that influence such behavior. The response to collective action problems must be collective since no one agent has the power to transform structures in isolation. But why are college campuses so often at the epicenter of movements involving structural injustice?

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that institutions of higher education play a unique role in combatting climate and other structural injustices, not only by conducting research and disseminating knowledge, but also by fostering a form of collective political responsibility. A philosophical analysis of different forms of collective responsibility, with specific attention to the Fossil Free divestment movement, reveals how social

² Perhaps Basken’s focus on the hard sciences is too limited. Other fields, such as philosophy, may encounter fewer limitations to pursuing such research. For one instance, see Kovel 2007. However, it is true that IPCC’s more recent 5th Assessment report is the first to address the moral implications of climate change and to include two philosophers among its authors. So one problem may be that the IPCC does not pay enough attention to work that falls under the social sciences and the humanities.

position facilitates this contribution more so in colleges than in other institutions. Section II examines three mutually reinforcing methods for understanding collective responsibility. Section III assesses these methods alongside climate change, a collective action problem that requires a political form of responsibility. Section IV argues that the fossil fuel divestment movement illustrates how colleges can leverage their unique social position to meet this responsibility. Section V concludes that college communities can do more to combat climate change by helping to foster this kind of activity on their campuses.

II. Three Approaches to Collective Responsibility

Most recognize that climate change demands a form of collective responsibility, but such a demand presents many philosophical difficulties.³ First, collective responsibility challenges principles of justice. *That* climate change is harmful is no longer so controversial as *who* is responsible for its harms. While most agree obligations should fall upon state agents, identifying these state agents among others has been a contentious issue (Brown 1998; Caney 2010; Gardiner 2011; Maniates 2001; Shue 1993; Traxler 2002). Candidates include, for example, those with the most historical emissions (Brown 1998; Caney 2010; Schüssler 2011), those who can reduce emissions in the most cost-effective manner (Posner and Weisbach 2010), or those who exceed equal per capita emission allowances (Singer 2002). Second, according to many climate experts, states are not acting quickly enough.⁴ Therefore, many question whether responsibilities fall upon other agents, such as local governments, corporations, other institutions, or even individual citizens. Such responsibilities may be direct, meaning agents should take actions to reduce their own emissions; or they may be indirect, meaning agents should pressure governments, which have more power to effect meaningful reductions through regulations and transnational agreements.

The scope of this paper includes neither principles of justly distributed cleanup burdens, nor the question of direct or indirect duties, but a more primary set of concerns: what is the nature of shared collective responsibility? There are at least two reasons to examine this question. First, the form of responsibility limits the shape its content might take; for instance, whether duties can even be direct or indirect, since form determines what kinds of collective agents are involved (i.e., whether responsibility is shared among collective agents). Since state agents are not acting quickly enough, this question becomes particularly important. Second, understanding the nature of collective responsibility will help identify the qualities colleges possess as collective agents that enable such responsibility, qualities that other institutions lack. Identifying this nature will help reveal how colleges are in a unique position to address climate change.

³ A number of problems arise with the concept of collective responsibility itself; however, they will not be discussed here. This paper assumes some form of collective responsibility is necessary to combat climate change; the present task is to determine the nature of this responsibility.

⁴ James Hansen, former NASA scientist turned activist, has even called COP 21 in Paris a “hoax” (Milman 2015).

Philosophers have adopted at least three different general methods for describing the structure of collective responsibility and how it arises. Each of these methods is outlined below. The next section will assess each method in light of climate change.⁵

Group agency and individual agency

The first approach examines the possibility and constitution of group agency. Presuming only agents can be morally responsible, collective responsibility must belong to collective agents. Many philosophers have outlined the criteria for collective agency. For the most part, these criteria mirror those for individual agency. Individual agents constitute a group agent when they share some combination of intentions, desires, and deliberative decision-making procedures (Gilbert 1992; List and Pettit 2011; Tuomela 2013). Collectives organized enough to possess collective responsibility are often referred to as “groups” to distinguish them from a “mere collective” of agents.

The concept of group agency is useful for several reasons. First, certain kinds of actions can only be taken by groups; for instance, a crowd at a sporting event performing the wave, or a team winning a football game. The wave cannot be performed alone just as a single player cannot win a game on her own (Isaacs 2011, p. 34). Second, group agency helps describe how people speak and feel about collectives such as political parties or companies as extra-individual entities (Held 1970, p. 471–472). People say they disapprove of a political party’s stance on an important social issue, or they are angry with *BP* for failing to implement an effective plan to stop a leaking oil rig. Finally, group agency helps avoid a “deficit of responsibility,” which may arise when no individual agent is responsible (List & Pettit 2011, p. 165). Companies can be penalized legally or morally (e.g., incur fines or blame) even when no single person can be found guilty of breaking a law.

Practical reasons for holding responsible

The second approach questions the practical reasons for holding collectives responsible even when they fail to exhibit features of agency. This approach captures the idea that individual agents are able to, often do, and most importantly *should* band together to solve collective action problems. For instance, onlookers should work together to save a drowning swimmer in turbulent waters, perhaps by forming a human chain. A mere collective, even of random agents, has a responsibility to organize action when the result is favorable to doing nothing (e.g., letting the swimmer drown), and when the required action is “obvious to the reasonable person” (Held 1970, p. 476).

The same responsibility applies to established organizations that lack the prerequisites for group agency discussed above – for instance, decision-making procedures. As with small children, holding collectives responsible when they do not display the full signs of moral agency can be instructive and can even encourage them to develop such capacities (List and Pettit 2011, pp. 157 & 193). Moral disapproval can encourage a company to develop proper offices and procedures for dealing with harms they may cause. Thus not just agency, but the *potential for* agency gives rise to responsibility.

Social connection and structural injustice

⁵ These three approaches are discussed in greater detail, alongside the difficulties of sharing responsibility for collective action problems, in Godoy (forthcoming).

The third approach grounds collective responsibility in neither collective agency nor its possibility alone, but in social position, or connection within a network of agency and collective projects that presume the interaction of many different agents (Young 2011). This form of responsibility is ideal for addressing what Young calls “structural injustice”:

Structural injustice...exists when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them. (p. 52)

The uncoordinated routine activities of many agents reproduce structural injustices; they are “a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting to pursue their particular goals and interests, for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms” (Young 2011, p. 52).

Climate change is a form of structural injustice. First, it results from routine, seemingly harmless activities in the domestic and economic spheres: e.g., travel, production, and investment. Second, climate change certainly puts large groups of people “under systematic threat of domination or deprivation” while also benefiting others. Those who have contributed least to climate change – the world’s poor and those yet to be born – stand to suffer its worst consequences. The world’s affluent also stands to benefit most from the conveniences of fossil fuel use – industrial production, and cheap transportation and energy. The world’s poor are most vulnerable, facing droughts, famine, water shortages, rising sea levels, floods, and storms all with fewer resources to mitigate their effects. Finally, the world’s affluent have become so in part because of their unrestricted ability to pollute the atmosphere with greenhouse gases, a byproduct of economic activity and growth.⁶

Structural harm differs qualitatively from harm that arises from individual actors (Young 2011, p. 44); even individual group agents. For instance, investigative journalists revealed that Exxon knew about the link between fossil fuels and climate change since at least 1977 (Banerjee, Song, and Hasemyer 2015). In this case, each individual member of Exxon may be guilty if she actively misled the public about how fossil fuels cause climate change. However, sometimes focus on individual offending agents alone is unhelpful. If one fails to question the structural factors that encourage “bad” behavior, then “bad” individual actions appear as anomalies rather than predictable byproducts. Indeed, a number of other energy companies shared information about the connection between fossil fuels and climate change (Banerjee 2015). Rather, preventing structural harm requires examining the various social structures that encourage or enable individual agents to cause it. How did so many multinational corporations actively mislead the public about their destructive practices in the pursuit of greater profits? Fossil fuel companies have a strong incentive to deny a link between their product and harm. The same was true of tobacco companies when smoking was linked to cancer. In fact, fossil fuel and tobacco companies confused the public about these links by using similar methods (Oreskes and Conway 2010).

⁶ Economic growth is almost always paired with increasing carbon dioxide levels. The exceptions are 2014 and 2015. The only other periods of declining carbon dioxide are associated with a slowing economy (International Energy Agency 2016).

Social connection responsibility is different from other forms of collective and individual responsibility in the following senses. First, responsibility for structural injustice corresponds to “social position,” or place of privilege or disadvantage the agent occupies relative to other agents, institutions, and social processes (Young 2011, p. 56). Second, this responsibility is neither collective nor individual, but shared;⁷ social position determines how it is shared. Finally, this responsibility aims to transform unjust structures, not hold individuals accountable for “bad” action, so it is met through collective action (Young 2011, p. 111). Agents are morally responsible because they participate in processes that lead to unjust outcomes. However, this responsibility is more than complicity in harm (Kutz 2007), since one does not meet it by withdrawing participation. Rather, meeting social connection responsibility requires examining one’s social position and acting with others to transform unjust structures. In other words, this is a forward-looking, political form of responsibility as opposed to a retrospective, individualized form (Young 2011, pp. 105–112).

III. Assessing Methods

This section examines each of the above three models alongside climate change as a form of structural injustice. Each model offers some insight into why universities have responsibilities to address climate change; however, the social connection model explains the role that the social position of colleges plays in giving a unique shape to these responsibilities relative to other institutions.

Isolated agents?

Most universities qualify as group agents. As such, they are appropriate subjects of collective responsibility according to the group agent approach. Failure to address responsibilities may warrant condemnation, blame, shame, or other responses from the public. However, this approach tends to individualize responsibility.

For instance, philosophers disagree over whether or how collective responsibility distributes among group members (Cooper 1968; Feinberg 1968; List and Pettit 2011; May 1998; Young 2011), though most agree “judgments assessed on members of the collectivity do not follow necessarily from judgments of collective blame” (French 1998, p. 25). In other words, an employee of ExxonMobil cannot apologize on behalf of the company for lying about its decades-long awareness of the connection between fossil fuels and global warming unless she is authorized to do so (List and Pettit 2001, p. 35–36). Likewise a citizen cannot apologize on behalf of his state for failing to ratify an international climate treaty. Group agency itself says nothing of how responsibility disseminates among agents: among group members, between group agents, and between members and non-members. Group agency concentrates responsibility within atomized agents (groups or individuals); by doing so, it isolates agency and fails to explain how sharing responsibility for climate change is possible.

Yet since climate change is a form of structural injustice, individuals, group agents, and states all need to cooperate to avert further harmful climate change. One college divesting of fossil fuels may make headlines, but will not affect much on its own. Furthermore, if only the actions or inactions of individual agents are considered, then the

⁷ For further discussion of the distinction between collective and shared responsibility, see May 1992 (pp. 106–107) and Young 2011 (pp. 110–111).

significance of such actions is lost in the vast sea of many other acting agents. Perhaps such actions have *communicative power* – may encourage others to act (Hourdequin 2011) – but not necessarily. Responsibility for structural injustice must be shared among agents.

Obvious and reasonable?

The second approach addresses some of the issues discussed above. First, it accords with moral intuitions about the obligation to solve problems by working together, constructing new group agents, even spur of the moment, when doing so produces morally preferable outcomes. This approach also encourages agents to further develop capacities to address new moral situations. The first step many schools take when considering divestment is to assemble a working group or committee to assess investments. While committees on socially responsible investment and sustainability have been common features of contemporary universities, new issues such as climate change and divestment strengthen interest in them.

However this approach becomes difficult when we consider problems on a global scale. The “obvious and reasonable” criteria may be clear in the case of a drowning swimmer, but as problems become more complex so do solutions. Agents should act with others to form new groups, but with whom they should be acting is unclear. Social connection adds to the practical reasons approach by giving agents parameters of reasoning about their action corresponding to social position.

Connected how?

The social connection approach holds that agents share a responsibility relative to their social position within the structures that lead to a warming climate. Like the practical reasons approach, this responsibility may entail developing new groups and structures. It may also ask group agents to draw from their position. But both the subject and content of responsibility – who must do what? – is still quite vague. To combat this, Young (2011) suggests four parameters by which to locate and distribute responsibility based on an agent's position within the network: privilege, collective ability, interest, and power (pp. 142–151). The next section examines how these parameters describe the social positions of universities, and how the fossil fuel divestment movement illustrates a form of this political responsibility by leveraging social position to influence change.

IV. Social Connection Responsibility on College Campuses

Because universities occupy similar social positions relative to one another, and because they are able to draw upon similar resources afforded by their social position, universities are candidates for sharing responsibility. Below each parameter is examined with reference to the divestment movement.

Privilege

Endowment-holding institutions reap profits from harmful investments, yet as institutions they avoid the terrible consequences, such as suffering and death, which befall actual people. This places them in a relative position of privilege. By forgoing this privilege, colleges prove such holdings unnecessary for financial health. Structural injustice arises from the routine (in this case, stockholding). Many think it immoral to benefit from the

harms of others. Divesting colleges uphold this principle when they surrender their privilege to draw benefits from fossil fuel investments. Social connection responsibility requires forfeiting this privilege in order to challenge the presumption that any agent should benefit from harmful practices. Sharing responsibility entails encouraging others to divest as well. Colleges send a public message to other colleges and stockholders when they join the Fossil Free movement: that they believe divestment is both possible and good.

Collective ability

The divestment movement targets all endowed institutions, which explains why many non-profit and government institutions are also involved. However, colleges are unique in their collective ability. Their decision-making mechanisms, more so than other institutions, often encourage the entire community to participate democratically in issues of governance. Student and faculty governing bodies are often represented at various levels of the institution, even at the board level. These bodies hold decision-makers accountable. They create new directives and committees, such as socially responsible investment committees. It has not been uncommon for board members, students, faculty, and staff to work together on divesting campuses. Compare this structure with that found in the corporate or political world. Employees often cannot criticize their superiors without fear of reprisal or loss of employment. Colleges also care a great deal about community development, ensuring that all students have both a place and a voice in the affairs of the community.⁸

Interest

“Sometimes agents’ interests coincide with the responsibility for justice” (Young 2011, p. 145). Colleges declare their purpose or interest through mission statements. These statements often make reference to increasing public welfare, benefiting society on a national and a global scale, improving the world for future generations, etc.; and more recently, colleges have pledged an interest in sustainability. Many Fossil Free chapters have leveraged their university’s mission statements in their arguments to divest. It is difficult to commit to future welfare while engaging in practices that work against it. Finally, colleges have an interest in the truth. The links between burning fossil fuels and climate change, and between profitability and shareholder support, are undeniable.

Power

Both individual agents within colleges and colleges as collective agents themselves possess unique powers to affect unjust structures merely by provoking debates about them. An organized student group has a great deal of power to influence its university’s decision-making processes. First, unlike employees at other institutions, students cannot be fired. Second, students are stakeholders in the reputations of the college; their diploma will bear its mark for their lifetime. Third, it reflects poorly on schools to expel students

⁸ This is at least true in principle. The recent Black Lives Matter movement raises questions about the place and voice of non-white students at American universities. Yet the movement strategically leverages this supposed principle of inclusion in order to help make its point.

engaged in peaceful political demonstration. Tenured faculty may have similar power, especially en masse.⁹

While students and faculty possess power within universities, universities themselves hold external power to influence public discourse. Their reputation as centers of knowledge and learning carries intellectual weight both within academia and in public culture at large. Each additional divesting university amplifies the influence of the movement. All endowment-holding universities have the power to divest. By exerting it, they hope to influence the political and economic structures that enable climate change.

V. Conclusion

This paper began with the claim that universities should be doing more to meet their collective responsibility to combat climate. Three different methods for describing collective responsibility were examined. The social connection model builds upon the group agent and practical reasons methods to highlight how responsibility arises, not in a vacuum, but in a complex network of social relations. Since climate change is a structural injustice, it too arises within a network of routine interactions. Meeting social connection responsibility entails leveraging one's position and working with other agents to transform the structures that encourage climate change. It follows that colleges could foster social connection responsibility in the form of campus discussion, activism, and movement building.

Note this paper makes no claim that divestment is best method for addressing climate change. This would require further studies. Rather, since climate change requires collective political action, colleges can help develop the form of responsibility required to spur positive social change by fostering these types of discussions and engaging with climate movements such as Fossil Free.

Campuses have historically housed a number of movements exercising political responsibility. Take for instance the South African divestment movement. The movement against apartheid was not born of strategy, but dissatisfaction with the governing structures that failed to adequately address injustice (Seidman 2015, p. 1017). Divestment began as an act of moral hand-washing, a communicative act of disapproval. College campuses played a significant role by provoking debates about the moral status of maintaining economic ties to apartheid (Seidman 2015, p. 1023). The seat of the movement's power was not the actual financial effect of divesting colleges, but the power to question – to politicize and moralize – the economic structures that allowed institutions to profit from apartheid. In other words, students and universities drew from their position to leverage social change, change which was only possible by sharing responsibility with other universities and institutions.

Laboratories and classrooms are therefore not the university's only resources for confronting climate change. Challenging structural injustice requires questioning the routines that sustain harmful practices. This can be controversial. Colleges can encourage members to engage in the necessary contentious debates, critical self-scrutiny, and experimental reimagining of harmful commonplace habits – and they can pledge to protect those members who do so. They can allow student and faculty representation in decision-making processes and provide information about their investments and practices

⁹ However, academic freedom is a value that is not equally admired everywhere.

necessary for informed decisions. The university community itself can become a lab and classroom, and colleges can lead the way instigating the cultural-political transformations necessary for confronting climate change.

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