

# Climate, Collective Action, and Individual Moral Responsibility

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## 1. Introduction

In recent papers, both Walter Sinnott-Armstrong<sup>1</sup> and Baylor Johnson<sup>2</sup> have argued that under current circumstances, individuals do not have obligations to reduce their personal contributions to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Johnson argues that climate change has the structure of a tragedy of the commons, and that there is no unilateral obligation to reduce emissions in a commons. Rather, one's moral obligation is to work toward a collective agreement that solves the problem. Similarly, Sinnott-Armstrong holds that with respect to climate change, there is nothing morally wrong with driving one's SUV for fun on a Sunday afternoon. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that one's personal choice to drive or not drive has little to no effect on the course of global climate change. Therefore, driving causes no (climate) harm and is morally permissible. We do, however, have an obligation to work toward governmental policies that will mitigate climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

This paper questions the conclusions of Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong. Though I agree that we have moral obligations to work toward collective agreements that will slow global climate change and mitigate its impacts, I disagree with the conclusion that individuals have no obligation to reduce their contributions to the problem. The paper thus explores rationales for the view that individuals *should* reduce their personal greenhouse gas emissions. I begin by discussing the idea of moral integrity, which recommends congruence between one's actions and positions at the personal and political levels. Although integrity provides one important rationale for a personal obligation to reduce greenhouse gases (in conjunction with an obligation to address the problem politically), it does not directly challenge the presumptions of collective action problems, which typically assume a sharp distinction between what is rational for (i.e., in the interests of) the individual and what is rational for (i.e., best for) society as a whole.

Drawing on a Confucian, relational conception of persons, I suggest that it is possible to reconceptualize collective action problems in such a way as to dissolve the stark contrast between the individually and the collectively rational. The Confucian perspective emphasizes the role of self-cultivation and individual moral development as the basis for social change. Although this view initially appears subject to the kinds of objections that Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong raise – that individual action in the absence of collective action achieves nothing – a more subtle characterization of the view shows that Confucius understood self-cultivation as essentially social in nature. Individual moral development thus involves the support and

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<sup>1</sup> "It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations," in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Richard B. Howarth, eds., *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Baylor Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons," *Environmental Values* 12 (2003): 271-287.

instantiation of social institutions that make possible social transformation. I argue that the Confucian perspective remains relevant, discussing how this perspective might fruitfully inform our approach to global climate change and help to reconcile individual and political action to mitigate it.

## 2. Johnson's Argument

As I have said, I disagree with both Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong regarding the absence of a personal obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in light of global climate change. I focus here primarily on Johnson's argument, however, which attempts to provide a specific theoretical ground for the lack of personal obligation, and hence has the potential to be more decisive than the Sinnott-Armstrong's. Rather than attempt to provide a principled positive case for the lack of personal obligation, Sinnott-Armstrong surveys a number of candidate arguments *for* such an obligation and finds each of them inadequate. The conclusion that we lack an obligation to reduce our personal emissions – or more precisely, that there is no clear ground for a personal obligation to reduce emissions – thus depends on the comprehensiveness of the survey. Since it is dubious that Sinnott-Armstrong has provided a fully comprehensive survey of all the potential grounds of a personal obligation to reduce emissions – in fact, the grounds I discuss below are not considered as a part of the survey – his argument remains far from decisive.

For my purposes, Johnson's position is more instructive, because it explains in some depth why climate change should be understood as a collective action problem, and why there is no unilateral obligation to avoid exploiting the commons in the absence of a collective agreement that puts restraints on individuals' use. Although I disagree with Johnson, he clearly shows how, from a standard collective action perspective, personal action to reduce one's contributions to the problem appears impotent with respect to its solution. What's more, insofar as one sacrifices one's own interests and well being in the course of such unilateral action, one may plausibly argue that it is in fact not just inefficacious, but irrational or even unethical to act unilaterally.

Let me explain in more detail Johnson's argument. In "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons," Johnson holds that the Kantian rationale for individual obligations with respect to the commons is misguided. According to the Kantian perspective, "every commons user ought, morally, to restrict his or her use to a level that would be sustainable if all other users reduced their use in a similar way, and to do this regardless of what others do."<sup>3</sup> Although intuitively appealing, this rationale overlooks a crucial distinction: the distinction between acting unilaterally, in the absence of a collective agreement, on the one hand, and acting to fulfill one's responsibilities as part of a collective agreement, on the other. Why is this distinction so crucial? For Johnson, the answer turns on the fact that unilateral action – which he understands as individual action to reduce one's depletion of a common resource in the absence of a collective agreement that governs exploitation levels by individuals – has little chance of making any significant positive contribution to solving the commons problem, and in many cases, may make no contribution at all.

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons," p. 272.

This is the case due to the structure of commons problems, which are characterized by three assumptions:<sup>4</sup>

1. The only incentive players have is to maximize 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.]
  - a. *So costs (to the commons) of increased use are shared, but benefits from increased use accrue to the individual...*  
*Benefits (to the commons) of reduced use are shared, but costs of reduced use are borne by the individual...*
  - b. Resources saved by one individual are available for use by any other user.

Because the costs of increased use are shared, yet each individual gains the full advantage of her increased use, each has an incentive – due to her goal of maximizing personal benefit from use of the commons – to use as much as possible. Furthermore, if an individual acts unilaterally, attempting to disrupt the inexorable logic that leads to the commons’ depletion, she simply leaves more resources for others to exploit. Her abstention communicates only a message of increased opportunity for others. There is thus no way for unilateral action to succeed in preventing the tragedy.

In the climate change case, one might think that even if all of this is true, it is nevertheless wrong to emit excessive quantities of greenhouse gases, because: 1) emitting greenhouse gases is in itself morally wrong, and 2) by emitting an excess of greenhouse gases, one is making the problem of climate change worse. However, according to both Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong, emitting greenhouse gases is not in itself morally wrong. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that an individual’s emissions alone have virtually no effect on climate change, nor do they create any kind of harm to humans or animals. Similarly, Johnson holds that it is only the *aggregate use* of the commons – in this case, the aggregate emissions of greenhouse gases – that causes harm: “individual acts are harmless in themselves.”<sup>5</sup> Yet given that others are exploiting the commons as well, don’t a particular individual’s emissions make climate change *worse*? To this, again, Sinnott-Armstrong says no, because an individual’s contribution is negligible and cannot, in itself, raise or lower the temperature of the planet. Following Johnson’s logic, one arrives at a similar conclusion: if the effect of an individual’s refraining from using the commons has no impact on aggregate use, then the same reasoning should imply that an individual’s unrestrained use will have no effect on aggregate use. When I use more, less is available for others. By the laws of supply and demand, my increased use – if it has any noticeable effect at all – will reduce supply, increasing price and causing a consequent downward adjustment in demand.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Johnson, “Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons,” p. 275.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, “Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons” p. 273.

<sup>6</sup> In “Unilateral Actions in a Tragedy of the Commons” (unpublished ms.), Johnson acknowledges that the supply-demand argument is contingent on features of the commodities in question. Where price elasticity is limited, reduced consumption may not significantly reduce price; similarly, increased consumption may not significantly raise it.

There are clearly a number of assumptions built in to these arguments that one might want to question, and I will return to questions about the logic of collective action problems in section four. First, however, I want to consider whether there might be any reason to reduce one's personal emissions even if Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong are right that doing so has no direct consequentialist payoff – that is, even if they are right that a reduction in emissions on my part will result in a nonexistent or negligible net change in greenhouse gas emissions overall.

### 3. Integrity as a Ground for an Obligation to Reduce Personal Emissions

Even if one doubts that personal obligations in a commons have a Kantian structure, one might nevertheless hold that there exists a personal obligation to reduce one's greenhouse gas emissions. One ground for such an obligation stems from the acceptance of an obligation that both Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong defend, plus the requirements of moral integrity. Although Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong believe that individuals have no obligation to reduce their personal emissions, both think that individuals *do* have obligations to respond to climate change. More specifically, individuals have obligations to work toward a collective solution to the problem. For Sinnott-Armstrong, this means that individuals have obligations to work toward the election of political candidates who will enact policies to reduce emissions at the national scale; for Johnson, the obligation is “to work for a collective agreement that could avert a potential T of C,” which encompasses, but is formulated more broadly than, Sinnott-Armstrong's characterization of individual obligations. If one accepts the existence of these obligations, then, I suggest, one must also accept some degree of personal obligation to control one's emissions. The common-sense ground for this latter obligation involves an obligation to avoid hypocrisy. However, the ground may be framed more positively as one of moral integrity. Before explaining why I believe that integrity, in conjunction with a commitment to mitigating the effects of climate change, entails an individual obligation to reduce emissions, I discuss briefly the ideal of integrity more generally.

Integrity is a frequently-cited virtue. The ideal of integrity figures widely in discussions of business ethics, for example, and in public life, integrity is widely regarded – despite its rarity – as a desired characteristic of politicians. From a philosophical perspective, however, integrity is difficult to pin down. In a recent paper, Audi and Murphy observe the dearth of explicit discussion of integrity in the literature on virtue ethics. They find, further, that ‘integrity’ is used to express diverse, and often vague, ideas:

In a great many cases, ‘integrity’ is a specific-sounding term for something like moral soundness, whose exact character is left quite unspecified.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, ‘integrity’ is a “blunt instrument,” one that lacks precision and in many cases could be replaced by a more specific term.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Audi and Murphy don't think that the concept of integrity should be abandoned altogether, and they set out to clarify some of the term's central meanings, focusing

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Audi and Patrick E. Murphy, “The Many Faces of Integrity,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 16 (2006): 3-21, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

on the ideas of *integration* and *being integral*. Both of these ideas are important to thinking about integrity in the context of our obligations regarding global climate change. First, *integrality* suggests that the internalization of certain commitments, such that these commitments are central to an individual's identity.<sup>9</sup> When a commitment is fully integral, the individual typically honors it without deliberation.<sup>10</sup> This sense of integrity clearly bears some relationship to the other sense, for if a commitment is to be integral to an individual's thought and action, it should be *well integrated* with other commitments the individual holds. Such integration helps the individual avoid conflicts among her various commitments. In this second sense, integration involves "a kind of unity among the elements in which they form a coherent, ideally a harmonious, structure."<sup>11</sup>

These two aspects of integrity – integration and integrality – are important to understanding an individual's obligations to address climate change. A person who is truly concerned about climate change and is committed to alleviating it to the best of her ability must make some effort to effect social change, as Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong suggest. However, a person of integrity who has this commitment will act also on a personal level to reduce her own emissions and will, in general, avoid frivolous emissions of greenhouse gases: her actions at the political level will be integrated with those at the personal level.

I am not sure that I want to say that someone who is working on the political level to reduce collective greenhouse gas emissions, but is not doing anything as an individual to reduce her emissions, is practically incoherent; yet it certainly seems that an individual who worked for emissions limiting policies while steadily and frivolously increasing her own emissions would be working at cross purposes. The kind of unity that integrity recommends requires that an individual work to harmonize her commitments at various levels and achieve a life in which her commitments are embodied not only in a single sphere, but in the various spheres she inhabits.

Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong might object at this point that integrity does not require personal action to reduce one's GHG emissions, even in light of a more general commitment to abate climate change, because the moral valence of one's actions at the personal and the political level is different. At the political level, one's efforts to support climate change policy have a positive moral valence because they are likely to have positive consequences with respect to climate change mitigation, whereas at the personal level one's efforts have a neutral moral valence because they are likely to have no consequences whatsoever with respect to climate change mitigation.

I should say, first, that I don't believe that this assessment is correct. It is dubious that one's riding a bike instead of driving will lower gas prices such that more people drive or that some people drive more. This *could* happen, I suppose, but what actually happens is probably highly context dependent, and there is an equally good argument to be made in favor of the view that one's commitment to cycling to work might actually cause others to reconsider their own driving habits. Even if such a reconsideration does not lead these individuals to take up biking

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<sup>9</sup> Audi and Murphy, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

themselves, they might think more carefully about how they utilize their cars, and perhaps even consider GHG emissions as they make their next car purchase.

However, even if it is sometimes the case that one's personal actions to reduce climate change have little to no effect on the course of climate change, integrity nevertheless requires a kind of synchrony between personal and political action that Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong fail to acknowledge. Let us grant that there may be cases in which one is justified making tradeoffs between one's actions at the personal and the political level. For example, we might think that Al Gore is morally justified in flying around the country (a GHG intensive activity) in order to promote awareness about climate change impacts and catalyze social change. Even so, we can acknowledge that Al Gore has a *prima facie* moral obligation to control his own emissions, such that his flying around the country to promote political action may be justified, but his own household energy use warrants scrutiny. In Al Gore's case, the tension is particularly stark, because he flies around the country not only to advocate large-scale policy changes, but to advocate that *individuals change their actions* so as to reduce their own contributions to the climate change problem.

Even if Gore was not advocating this kind of individual action, however, it seems to me that being a person of integrity involves reconciling, insofar as one can, one's commitments at various levels. Consequentialist calculations can cut against such integration (witness the moral valence argument above), but this is often a shortcoming rather than a virtue. Consequentialism has long been criticized for its failure to recognize the separateness of persons. In consequentialist arguments against an obligation to reduce one's own emissions, the reasoning fails to recognize the *wholeness* of persons. That is, consequentialism not only blurs the boundaries between individuals, but fails to acknowledge a coherent structure *within* them, as Bernard Williams has cogently pointed out.<sup>12</sup> To coherently structure one's life around a commitment to mitigate climate change requires that one take this commitment seriously in both one's personal life and one's political action. And unless there is good reason to believe that restricting one's own emissions would undermine larger scale change, those committed to the overall goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions ought to do so themselves. The virtue of integrity entails that this obligation holds even if one's personal actions are themselves neutral with respect to their consequences.<sup>13</sup>

In principle, I believe that consequentialist considerations have an important role to play in ethics, so what I have said should not be taken as a general indictment of consequentialist reasoning. However, consequentialist reasoning in the arguments for a political, but not personal, obligation with respect to climate change does not take adequate account of human psychology. Pointing to integrity as a countervailing consideration is valuable in this context because it takes fuller account of psychological considerations that make the stark separation of personal and political obligations unreasonable and undesirable.

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<sup>12</sup> See Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J.C.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (New York: Cambridge, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly enough, a consequentialist justification can be offered for this claim: if part of what allows us to take our commitments seriously is a unity among them and a unity between thought and action, then a person may take his commitment to political action to address climate change more seriously if the commitment to mitigating climate change also is expressed in personal action.

Nevertheless, the value of integrity can itself be justified on consequentialist grounds, albeit grounds reflecting sensitivity to human psychology. Integrity is a virtue for both intrapersonal and interpersonal reasons. At the intrapersonal level, integrity is a moral virtue that acknowledges the psychological and agential benefits of integrating one's commitments into a coherent whole, and of bringing one's beliefs, words, and actions into line with one another. Interpersonally, integrity is a virtue from the perspective of intersubjective intelligibility and in affirming to others the authenticity of one's commitments. Where we see in others a lack of coherence between their political commitments and personal choices, we often wonder how to make sense of this apparent mismatch, and we may question the sincerity with which certain commitments are held. A politician's environmental commitments, as embodied in public pronouncements and legislative support, for example, may be called into question if he or she lives a lavish and environmentally damaging lifestyle.<sup>14</sup>

Mark Halfon suggests another ground for the value of integrity. He describes a case in which an individual is dedicated to political change – in this case, the abolition of institutionalized racism – and suffers significantly as a result of this commitment because she is protesting official government policy. What's more, in the case Halfon describes, it is highly unlikely that the activist's commitment will be effective in inducing a change in government policy. From a consequentialist perspective, then, the activist's commitments make no sense: she is bringing more suffering upon herself than she is likely to alleviate through her commitment. We may nevertheless say that the activist is a person of integrity, and that her integrity is morally admirable. Why? Halfon says that “[o]ne thing that can be said [about such a person] is that she wants or chooses to be a certain kind of person, or to live a certain way of life, and that her life loses its meaning or point if she fails to actively fight against what she believes to be a demeaning and unjust institution.”<sup>15</sup> In the case of climate change, we might say that a commitment to mitigating climate change should, in general, entail a commitment to being the kind of person who is thoughtful about her greenhouse gas emissions and makes an effort to reduce them. Just as it would be odd and morally problematic for an environmental activist who is fighting for controls on non-point source pollution to dump large quantities of fertilizer on her lawn, it is odd and morally problematic for a climate change activist to be profligate and thoughtless about her GHG emissions.

The rationale Halfon articulates here is one tied to questions of identity and self-conception. Halfon draws on the Aristotelian tradition to further develop this idea. While sharing with Halfon the view that considerations of identity and self-conception are important in thinking about the grounds of moral obligation, I discuss below these issues from a Confucian rather than an Aristotelian perspective. The Confucian perspective, I argue, holds promise in that it reveals more thoroughly than the integrity approach the crucial problems with arguments against a personal obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In particular, the Confucian

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson acknowledges that individual action “may be necessary to convince others of one's sincerity and of the viability of what one proposes” at the political level – he thus sees a pragmatic reason, under certain circumstances, for unilateral reductions. However, he indicates that if his argument against the efficacy of unilateral actions goes through, then people should not see failures to make individual reductions as hypocritical in those advocating political change.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Halfon, *Integrity: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 146.

approach differs from the integrity approach in that it directly challenges the presuppositions of collective action problems, whose seriousness and intractability arises in part from the framing of the problems themselves.

#### 4. Confucianism and Collective Action

Recall, first, the logic of collective action problems, outlined above, that leads Johnson to conclude that unilateral action to reduce one's emissions in a tragedy of the commons will be fruitless, and even self-defeating:

1. The only incentive players have is to maximize 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.]<sup>16</sup>

Commons problems presuppose that individuals are rational economic actors who seek to take personal advantage of the commons to the greatest degree possible and do not influence one another's thinking or decision making in morally salient ways. A single individual's restraint will be exploited by others. Thus, unilateral restraint is not only irrational, but morally powerless: unilateral action will do nothing to save the commons from overexploitation.

A Confucian perspective on morality challenges this view. First, and perhaps most importantly, Confucian philosophy does not understand the individual as an isolated, rational actor. Instead, the Confucian self is defined *relationally*.<sup>17</sup> Persons are constituted by and through their relations with others. According to Confucianism, we learn how to be persons – how to be moral and how to live in a community with others – first in the family. There, children witness generosity and care and learn the virtues of respect and gratitude. Children also learn to understand themselves as an integral part of a human community, where their actions not only have material consequences, but also symbolic meaning. Though it may not matter, functionally, what kind of vessel one uses to pour water or what kind of material is used to make one's garments, such choices may have significant symbolic importance within the culture, such that one may express respect by making one choice and disrespect by making another.

The Confucian model is, further, one in which individuals look to one another as examples. In the *Analects*, Confucius observes that there is no one from whom he cannot learn:

There is no man who does not have something of the way of Wen and Wu in him. Superior men have got hold of what is of major significance while inferior men have got hold of what is minor significance. From whom, then, does the Master not learn?<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Again, these assumptions are taken directly from Johnson, "Ethical Obligations in a Tragedy of the Commons," p. 275.

<sup>17</sup> See David Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), pp. 26-32 and Henry Rosemont, "Rights-bearing Individuals and Role-bearing Persons," in Mary I. Bockover, ed., *Rules, Rituals, and Responsibilities: Essays Dedicated to Herbert Fingarette* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Press, 1991), p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> Confucius. *The Analects* (Lun yu). D.C. Lau, translator. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983), 19.22.

Confucius also believes that moral models have magnetic power: virtue, he holds, is contagious, such that virtuous individuals can effect moral reform through their actions by inspiring others to change themselves.<sup>19</sup>

Whether upright individuals have the moral powers Confucius attributes to them may be controversial. Contra Confucius, the rational actor model suggests that altruistic individuals simply provide opportunities of which others take advantage. However, even if the Confucian optimism about a single individual's transformative powers is overstated, the conception of the self that figures in Confucian ethics provides an important counterpoint to the model of the rational economic actor, and represents not only an alternative *possibility* for the construction of human identities, but a possibility that many people actually embrace – at least in certain contexts. This possibility may, in turn, help provide an important way out of the seemingly inexorable logic of collective action problems.

Contrasting Garrett Hardin's approach to commons problems with a Confucian one may help illustrate more clearly this point. Hardin argues, with respect to his canonical example of the sheep pasture, that in the absence of top-down measures to limit grazing on the commons, individuals will fail to show the restraint necessary to sustain the commons as a resource for all. The solution to such problems, according to Hardin, requires coercion, or as he puts it "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of the people affected."<sup>20</sup> Hardin is deeply skeptical of the prospects for "conscience" to play a role in the solution to collective action problems; instead, he recommends privatization of resources, taxation, and legislative prohibitions of certain behaviors. Hardin's recommendation finds echoes in the views of Johnson, for if Hardin is right (as Johnson seems to accept), then it is not individual action, but rather only large-scale social policy that can resolve problems such as climate change.

Yet Hardin's recommendations diverge significantly from those of Confucius, who explicitly rejects coercion as a route to genuine social reform:

The Master said, 'Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble, but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves.'<sup>21</sup>

On this view, coercion may keep people "out of trouble," however it cannot accomplish the kind of thoroughgoing social reform – involving the transformation of minds as well as actions – that Confucius seeks. The *Analects* suggests that reform achieved primarily through coercion will be both shallow and unstable. What need to change in order to solve a collective action problem are not just incentives for individually rational agents. Confucius emphasizes that policy is not enough: what is also crucial is change in individuals, through moral self-cultivation. Changing institutions without changing people will not resolve tensions between the individual and the collective good.

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *Analects* 12.19, 16.1, and 4.25.

<sup>20</sup> Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162 (1968): 1243-1248, p. 1247.

<sup>21</sup> *Analects* 2.3.

In the contemporary context, the Confucian point is this: while one can provide both carrots, in the form of economic incentives, and sticks, in the form of laws and regulations, to foster reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, such top-down measures are likely to comprise only *part* of the solution. If people do not recognize and affirm the need to control their greenhouse gas emissions, the effectiveness of such efforts may be limited or unstable. Aldo Leopold made a similar point long ago when he complained about farmers who were willing to enact conservation on their lands only when such measures were paid for by others, and argued for an environmentalism based on a broadened sense of responsibility, embodied in an ecological conscience.<sup>22</sup>

I do not want to argue so much for the ineffectiveness of policy-level changes as I do for the efficacy of individual action to reduce one's own emissions. In this regard, the Confucian model is instructive because it asks us to recognize the possibility that persons need not – and many do not – see themselves as rational economic actors, making decisions based only on some preference structure that stands independent of social consequences or others' values and decisions. If persons are constituted relationally, as Confucians suggest, then one's actions cannot be treated as independent of others, and one's personal actions cannot be understood in isolation from their social meaning. Whether one chooses to drive a hybrid electric vehicle and to minimize one's miles driven, or to drive a gas-guzzling SUV with no thought about the number of car trips one takes, one communicates not merely information about how much of the atmospheric commons one is using up, but also sends a message regarding one's concern (or lack thereof) for the commons. It is my contention that where people see themselves as connected members of a moral community, they react to such messages in moral ways: by admiring, and in some cases at least, emulating those whose actions protect the commons, and by criticizing, and in some cases, openly reprimanding those whose actions do not. Such responses can assist in the responsible management of common resources. What seem unlikely to foster such responses, however, are arguments and conceptual frameworks that treat individuals as atomistic economic actors whose personal efforts to reduce damage to the commons are viewed as irrational and of little or no moral value. As research by Robert Frank strongly suggests, people see the *Homo economicus* framework not only as descriptive, but as normative, such that the application of models of economic rationality to environmental problems may encourage people to conceptualize themselves and act in accordance with the assumptions of these models.<sup>23</sup>

Yet despite the prevalence of such models in our contemporary society (which no doubt give support to those who choose not to do anything to reduce their personal emissions), there is good evidence that many people do not understand themselves or their decisions exclusively or even primarily through this lens. For example, people seem to view and judge others' personal choices about what kind of car to drive as moral choices that reflect their overall commitment (or lack thereof) to solving the "collective action problem" of climate change. In recent research, Thomas Turrentine and Kenneth Kurani found in interviews with car owners that people who drove hybrids expressed anger toward purchasers of SUVs,<sup>24</sup> presumably based on their

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<sup>22</sup> Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> See Robert H. Frank, Thomas Gilovich and Dennis T. Regan, "Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7 (1993): 159-171.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Turrentine and Kenneth Kurani, "Car Buyers and Fuel Economy?" *Energy Policy* 35 (2007): 1213-1223.

environmental impact. Furthermore, individuals who purchased hybrid electric vehicles often cited other HEV owners as models for their purchasing decisions, and Turrentine and Kurani found that people rarely purchase HEVs based on the kind of decision-making process described by the rational economic actor model. People rarely know how much they spend on fuel, for example, or how many miles per gallon their cars achieve, and when considering an HEV purchase, they rarely calculate how long it would take for the fuel efficiency payback to compensate for the premium in the purchase price.<sup>25</sup> Instead, people choose HEVs to make a statement, to express their commitment to the environment, and to discuss with others their choice.<sup>26</sup>

The traditional framework of collective action suggests that such individual actions can have no positive effect on the development of a large-scale solution to the problem. But if the data from HEV purchasing are any indication, then it seems that one individual's environmentally conscious decision can spur another's, and decisions about what kind of car to buy, how much to drive, and so on, are viewed by many as falling within the moral sphere. Such decisions are the subject of others' moral judgments and can be the basis for social approbation and disapprobation – and we know from models in evolutionary game theory that moralistic punishment of selfish (or otherwise socially-disapproved) actions can lead to the stabilization of altruistic (or socially approved) behaviors within a population.<sup>27</sup>

The important message is that if individuals do not see themselves solely as rational economic actors – and the evidence suggest that they do not – then there are ways in which so-called “unilateral” actions by individuals can influence other individuals not to take advantage of the “excess resources” remaining in the commons, but to see the restraint of others as a model for their own exercise of restraint. What's more, if there is a sufficient critical mass of individuals who are committed to such restraint, they can exercise moral suasion over the more obdurate members of the community, and they are better positioned to form a bloc whose commitment to protecting the commons can be voiced effectively through legislative or other channels.

Just as individuals are not atomistic actors, isolated from one another in their decisions and values, actions at the individual level are not divorced from those in the political sphere. A commitment at the personal level may in fact spur greater awareness and more careful consideration of the kinds of political changes that may be most effective. After installing solar panels on one's house, for example, one may recognize more clearly the importance of net metering legislation and feel more inclined to lobby for it than one would based on the abstract recognition that such legislation would be a good thing.

If we take seriously a Confucian conception of persons as both descriptive and normative, then we ought not assume – as the logic of collective action problems does – that the motives of individuals who partake of the shared resources of a commons are narrowly self-interested. Confucian morality counsels against such an individualistic self-conception, and the work of Turrentine and Kurani suggests that the presuppositions of the collective action framework are

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<sup>25</sup> Turrentine and Kurani, “Car Buyers and Fuel Economy?”

<sup>26</sup> Turrentine and Kurani, “Car Buyers and Fuel Economy?”, p. 1221.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson, “Punishment Allows the Evolution of Cooperation (or Anything Else) in Sizable Groups,” *Ethology and Sociobiology* 13 (1992): 171-195.

not necessarily borne out, even in a highly individualistic culture such as that of the United States. Since philosophical and economic characterizations of persons have both descriptive and normative functions, such that these characterizations may produce the very kinds of persons they describe, we should consider carefully the heuristic value of thinking about our climate change obligations in a traditional collective action context. Although the collective action framework may be useful for certain purposes, it is not clear that it provides an adequate justification for the view that in the absence of a collective agreement, individuals have no obligation to reduce their personal greenhouse gas emissions. Collective agreements can emerge in a variety of ways, and the hybrid vehicle example above suggests that individual consumer decisions, personal conversations about such decisions, and similar small-scale, local actions may turn out to be important catalysts for emerging collective agreements, and may support and reinforce agreements and policies at larger scales. Hence, the distinction between acting unilaterally and acting to fulfill one's responsibilities as part of a collective agreement is not sharp, but rather a matter of degree. As such, a strong distinction between one's obligations under a collective agreement and one's obligations in the absence of such an agreement is unjustified.

Part of what makes personal choices effective and morally important is that personal choices have a communicative and social function. On the Confucian view, individual actions gain their moral value in a social context. Thus, although Confucius emphasizes the importance of virtuous action at the personal level; he also insists that one ought not to ignore one's political obligations in order to preserve personal moral purity, nor withdraw from society in order to live – in isolation – in accord with one's individual values. With respect to climate change, a Confucian perspective would therefore support a personal moral obligation to reduce one's greenhouse gas emissions, but insist that one's obligations do not end there: one ought also to work for larger scale social reform, for regional, national, and international policies to reduce emissions and mitigate the effects of global warming.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that there are at least two grounds on which to question the view that individuals have no obligation to reduce their personal greenhouse gas emissions. The first is based on an argument from integrity, which requires consistent expression of one's commitments at the personal and political level. The second argument draws on the Confucian conception of morality and personhood to highlight the relational and symbolic dimensions of human action. On this view, the dichotomy between the individually and the collectively rational is drawn too starkly in the traditional framing of collective action problems. Because individuals are constituted relationally, their actions have moral significance both in the context of their local interactions and in the context of larger communities. From a Confucian point of view, one cannot neatly separate individuals from the community or parse the costs and benefits of action in the terms outlined in the framing of collective action problems, because morally mature individuals do not understand incentives as so framed.

In the case of climate change, an atomistic conception of persons can lead to two different kinds of problems. The first is one in which individualism supports the view that an individual's *only* responsibility is at the personal level; the second is one that supports the view

that the individual's only responsibility in a "tragedy of the commons" is at the level of policy. The arguments of Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong respond to the first problematic kind of individualism. It is this kind of individualism that can lead people to believe that so long as they "live lightly on the planet," they are not responsible for the depletion of resources and damage to the earth's climate and need not take political action to address these problems. This kind of individualism fails to recognize the individual's role in society and broad responsibility to promote good social decisions.

However, a second kind of individualism is equally problematic: this is the individualism that finds its expression in the view that one's only responsibility is to change society without changing oneself. This kind of individualism, which rests on the sort of assumptions that characterize collective action problems, fails to recognize the connections between the personal and the social, the expressive function of personal action, the importance of integrity, the role of individual action in constructing one's moral identity, and the effect of individual action on one's relations with others, and on *their* actions. I have tried, in this paper, to highlight the problems with this latter kind of individualism, and the promise of abandoning it.

Johnson and Sinnott-Armstrong hold that there is no personal moral obligation to reduce GHG emissions because personal reductions cannot mitigate the problem of global climate change. I have argued that personal reductions *can* make a contribution, and hence that if there is an obligation to ameliorate climate change, it includes a personal obligation to control one's own emissions. However, I have also suggested that in order to see how personal reductions can contribute – and in order for such contributions to be most effective – we may need to conceptualize persons differently, more relationally, than is the case in a tragedy of the commons model.