

Philosophers as Advocates for Reparative Climate Justice

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1. Introduction

Should philosophers be advocates for climate justice? To start to answer this question, we might consider reasons why philosophers should be advocates generally, whether as individuals or as a community. We might focus on philosophers' interests: What matters to us? What do we care about? Or we might focus on our distinctive skills and abilities. What are we good for? What are we well-positioned or well-suited to do? In addition to these are good grounds for philosophers' advocacy, here I want to argue for philosophers' advocacy as practices of reparative justice – that is, advocacy in the moral aftermath of our own and others' wrongdoings. And more specifically, I want to argue for an approach to reparative climate justice in which philosophers as advocates have distinctive roles to play.

2. Toward Reparative Environmental Justice

In recent work (Almassi 2020) I have argued for *reparative environmental justice* as a non-ideal approach to environmental ethics, one which takes the aftermath of environmental injustice, destruction, degradation, and wrong-doing generally as an important, often neglected context for ethical analysis and action. I begin with the idea that environmental injustice and other wrongs do moral damage to our relationships – intercultural, intergenerational, interspecies, otherwise – which calls for processes of moral repair if these ecologically significant relationships are to be made healthier than they have become in the wake of wrongdoing. This approach is situated alongside and indebted to other relational environmental work by Hourdequin & Wong (2005), Robin Wall Kimmerer (2011; 2013), Karen Emmerman (2014; 2019), and Sarah Fredericks (2019; 2021) and draws on general accounts of moral repair and reparative justice from Linda Radzik (2002), Janna Thompson (2002; 2009; 2015), and especially Margaret Urban Walker (2006a; 2006b; 2010; 2015).

Responses to wrongdoing may be distinguished by their objects of emphasis. If retributive justice focuses on perpetrators' offenses and restitutive justice focuses on victims' losses, reparative and restorative justice focus on the relationships among perpetrators, victims, and other community members, relationships damaged by wrongdoing and in need of amelioration – as Walker (2006a, 28) puts it, “*restoring or creating trust and hope in a shared sense of value and responsibility.*” Constitutive practices of relational repair include acknowledgements of wrongdoing, apologies, making amends, and eventually forgiveness. They involve the individuals directly involved but also other community members, who hold wrongdoers accountable for our actions and recognize victims' standing to call for this accountability. Despite popular assumptions, reparative justice is not essentially about monetary payments. Reparations are not meant as compensation for losses incurred but as *communicative acts*, expressions of apology and amends toward renewed trust and cooperation. For proponents and practitioners of reparative and restorative justice, as Rupert Ross (2006, xvii) explains, “the harm is only peripherally about ‘stuff’. Instead, the harm is understood in the relational realm.”

Reparations and material compensation are crucially different. When we seek to make amends through a reparative process, we do not aim to offer proportionate compensation for wrongdoing or an apologetic partial compensation. Reparations are given direction not by making victims whole for what they have lost but by expressing what victims need to see happen in order to repair the damaged relationship. As Walker (2015, 217) puts it, reparations are “a medium for the contentious yet hopeful negotiation in the present of proper recognition of the past and proper terms of relation in the future.” Understood in this way, reparative justice does not ask us to look backward but to do what we can to repair relationships and communities that have been hurt by injustice. Admitting and apologizing for our part in wrongdoing and making amends matter because of the expressive burden (Walker 2013) that they carry: their ability to convey regret, to acknowledge wrongdoing, and most of all, to recognize those who have been hurt as members of our shared community deserving equal respect and consideration.

3. Climate Justice and Intergenerational Relationality

It bears emphasis that doing reparative justice need not treat all of our varied relationships the same way. And as we consider environmental relationality in particular, that reminder remains important. We stand in different kinds of relationships with the members of what Aldo Leopold (1966) calls our *biotic community*. There is no one way to understand relational damage or enact relational repair that applies uniformly across all of our environmentally significant relationships. This is no less true for climate justice than for other environmental contexts, where relationships between perpetrators and victims cut across not only international, intercultural, and interspecies divides, but intergenerational differences as well.

I am reminded of Walker’s (2001, 112) observation that philosophers often characterize ethics as “answering the question, ‘What ought I to do?’ which I implies a set of choices on a fresh page. Yet one of our recurrent ethical tasks is better suggested by the question ‘What ought I to do *now*?’ after the page is blotted or torn by our own or others’ wrongdoing.” If and when we fail to meet our climate duties, what sort of ameliorative responsibilities follow from our moral failure? Here I submit that we need practices of reparative intergenerational justice given anthropogenic global climate change.

Reparative climate justice means attending to strained and broken relationality in the aftermath of wrongdoing. Yet many ethicists continue to frame climate justice in ideal terms (Page 2006; Garvey 2008; Hiskes 2009). Among those who discuss what to do given climate injustice, many otherwise genuinely worthwhile analyses sideline issues of relationality (cf. Shue 1999; Gardiner 2011; Jamieson 2014). One notable departure is Annette Baier’s 1981 paper “The Rights of Past and Future Persons,” in which Baier builds an intergenerational relational ethic on the idea that past, present, and future persons are all “members of a cross-generational community, a community of beings who look before and after, who interpret the past in light of the present, who see the future as growing out of the past, who see themselves as members of enduring families, nations, cultures, traditions” (1981, 177). Here she joins a long philosophical tradition, from Burke’s cross-generational community to Rawls’s social union across generations and since continuing with Thompson (2002; 2009) and de Shalit (2011), among others. One feature of Baier’s cross-generational community worth emphasizing is that it includes past as well as present and future persons. Contrast this with Barry’s (1999) account of intergenerational justice as strictly between present and future generations or Hiskes’s (2009) similarly future-facing view of intergenerational

justice. Our duty of sustainability, for example, “rises as much from a right of past persons to have their good intentions respected as it does from any right of future persons,” Baier argues (1981, 176). And the rights of past persons are not limited to the past, but are also forward-looking, in the sense that they create what Lukas Meyer (2006, 413) calls *surviving duties*. “The rights imply duties that are (also) binding after the death of the bearer of the right if the appropriate bearer of the duty is identified.” It’s not that past persons will know whether present or future persons will respect their wishes, keep our promises, or continue with the projects that mattered to them. Even if they cannot know, past persons can nonetheless be indirectly affected by what present and future persons do (and do not do). Acknowledging prior generations as victims of wrongdoing cannot change their well-being, but fulfilling our surviving duties to them *changes the relationship* between us. And to the extent that present and future persons fail to respect the rights of past persons as members of a cross-generational community, past persons may also be victims of fresh injustices and targets of intergenerational restorative justice in that respect as well.

Baier recognizes the possibility of intergenerational ethical failure and finds that failure to meet our obligations toward future generations creates more obligations to them. Specifically, she says, “We incur obligations to compensate our victims in a future overcrowded world for the harm we have thereby done them” (1981, 177). Framing this as a duty of compensation, Baier’s analysis conflicts with the reparative response to intergenerational injustice that I advocate here, though I am indebted to her characterization of intergenerational relationality and dependency.

4. Some Virtues of Reparative Climate Justice

Reparative justice may seem an odd fit for reckoning with the implications of climate change. For one thing, the constitutive practices of reparative justice are well suited for relational repair in local communities, while anthropogenic climate change is truly a global phenomenon. From desertification to island nations and other low-lying regions threatened by rising sea levels, the people and places burdened by climate change are often distant, physically if not ecologically speaking, from those most responsible for it. Climate change occurs not just internationally but also intergenerationally; its causes and effects are both spatially and temporally diffuse. Among other things this means that the perpetrators of climate injustices are often spared from having to see the consequences of what they have done, and the victims of climate injustices are often unable to confront those who have wronged them directly.

Despite these complications, I am optimistic about the prospects for a thoroughly international and intergenerational reparative form of climate justice. For one, climate reparations avoid some of the conceptual and practical problems facing compensatory or restitutive responses to climate harms and other wrongdoings. Compensation for global climate change is complicated by how entangled our partial contributions are in their collective ecological effects. What the debate between Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and his critics on the ethics of individual emissions shows is that neither individual nor group emissions function in isolation (Sinnott-Armstrong 2005; Nolt 2011; Hiller 2011; Almassi 2012; Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong 2018; Broome 2019). Others’ contributions significantly affect how harmful or benign one’s own contribution will prove to be. It is difficult if not impossible to determine the comparable compensation owed by individual or group emitters from an earlier generation to members of future generations (not to mention what is owed past persons) considered in isolation. For climate reparations, by contrast, the response to climate injustice is not compensation but rather accountability and amends needed to renew the conditions

on which our relationships may be rebuilt. To the extent that intergenerational amelioration is appropriate, it is not to achieve comparable compensation. Rather, what we are doing in reparative climate justice is making amends toward cross-generational trustworthiness and forgiveness.

In “Reparative Justice for Climate Refugees,” Rebecca Buxton (2019, 1999) argues that one thing that makes climate reparations different and preferable to compensation is the question of who can give it. Where compensation could be provided to a victim by a third party, reparations by their nature must be made by those responsible for the harm in question. I would add that, in cases in which those responsible are as yet unable or unwilling to apologize and make amends for their wrongdoing, third parties may play a much needed role in recognizing the wrongdoing, providing aid, and reaffirming victims’ moral standing to call for accountability. As important as such third-party measures can be, Buxton is right that they alone are not enough for moral repair. They do not relieve those responsible for harm from their ameliorative duties, and they do not repair the conditions of a relationship between perpetrator and victim that injustice has damaged or destroyed.

Reparative climate justice accommodates and gives direction to relational repair for a wide array of relationships damaged both directly indirectly by the parties’ respective perpetrations and experiences of climate change. As Gardiner & Hartzell-Nichols (2012) remind us, the temporal diffusion of climate change presents distinct ethical challenges. As we slowly start to recognize the anthropogenic nature of recent climate changes (frequency and severity of hurricanes, rising sea levels and temperatures, and so on) it can be tempting to blame contemporary emitters for attendant harms that humans, other animals, and the rest of the world are experiencing today. Yet those most responsible for the climatological changes felt now might be long dead; those most affected by current greenhouse-gas emissions may not yet be alive. This is not exclusively so, to be sure: the asynchronicity of emissions and their effects is not so protracted as to preclude *some* temporal overlap between those who have caused and those who will experience climatological harms. But reparative justice for anthropogenic climate change need not be limited to members of the eldest living generation. Others of us should also work to repair the damaged conditions of our relationships – with past and future persons, yes, but also with those currently feeling the harmful effects of climate change, even if our emissions did not cause the harmful changes that they will soon experience or are experiencing already. Contributing to anthropogenic climate change undermines healthy relationality with those experiencing the harms of climate change, even if our respective experiences may not be directly causally connected. I might not have harmed you, so I do not owe you compensation. Nevertheless I am responsible for the very sort of thing that you are experiencing, and this calls for relational repair.

5. Reasons and Risks for Philosophers’ Climate Advocacy

Advocacy in reparative climate justice may be undertaken (a) as acts of amends from repentant perpetrators but also (b) as third-party acknowledgements of and affirmation of wronged parties’ standing to demand accountability. In both cases, such advocacy is victim-centered: in substance (How do victims need us to advocate on their behalf?); in audience orientation (To whom should we be directing our advocacy?); and even whether we ought to be engaging in advocacy at all.

Philosophers specifically might advocate for reparative climate justice for several (not mutually exclusive) reasons. First, as noted above, because of our interests. As philosophers, many of us

have a significant interest in justice, whether professionally or personally or both. Second, we should participate in advocacy for reparative climate justice because of our skills and abilities: in ethical advising (Davis 2015), for example; translations of victim subjectivities for perpetrator apologies and amends (Alcoff 1991; Haggerty 2009); diagnosis of epistemic injustices against traditional ecological knowledge and knowers (Whyte 2013; Almassi 2020, 87-108); and so on. Third, philosophers should advocate for reparative climate justice as individuals and members of communities wronged by climate injustice, in recognition that reparative justice must be guided by the perspectives and priorities of those who have been wronged (Walker 2010) and that lasting climate justice is impossible without relational repair between communities that benefit from and communities burdened by historical and persisting environmental injustice (Whyte 2020). Fourth, philosophers should advocate for reparative climate justice because of our prior and persisting environmental wrongdoings individually and collectively, as members of philosophical and other communities. The last of these includes not only our own contribution to climate change but also our complicity in institutional climatological harms and our silence in holding powerful parties accountable for their actions (and their failures to acknowledge, apologize, and make amends for such actions).

One lesson from the literature on moral repair and reparative justice which I have found extends to issues of environmental wrongdoing generally, and anthropogenic climate change specifically, is the risk of second-order perpetrations of further injustices and other wrongs in the aftermath of the precipitating moral failure. Philosophers' advocacy for reparative climate justice is itself not without risk, depending on how we act, speak, and listen in processes of relational repair. I close by flagging some particularly live risks of second-order injustices in philosophers' advocacy for reparative climate justice. But this short list isn't meant to be exhaustive. I would welcome any suggestions for what else to anticipate for (or acknowledge as an already existing implication of) our reparative efforts.

The first such challenge for philosophers' advocacy for reparative climate justice concerns what Norah Berenstain (2016) calls *epistemic exploitation*. How can we advocate for climate justice without expecting marginalized persons to educate privileged persons on the nature of their oppression? We can certainly envision how efforts at reparative justice might take this turn. Yet contrite perpetrators seeking to make amends for their part in climate change and to demonstrate trustworthiness can be guided by victims' needs and priorities without expecting victims to walk them through the reparative process. It is one thing to listen, another to compel speech. Indeed, many victims of climate change *have been* and *are now* expressing themselves. Their testimonies are already available to be heard, even if now-penitent perpetrators were not previously listening. (See Davis 2016 and Davis 2018 on the related phenomena of epistemic appropriation and type-casting.)

But this of course reminds us of the intergenerational (as well as international and intercultural) nature of anthropogenic global climate change. The asynchronicity of intergenerational relations is an impediment for the requirement that acts of amends be directed in accordance with victims' needs and subjectivities. Earlier generations may be inclined to appeal to their own subjectivities through misplaced empathy, giving the impression that we are deferring to future people even as their actual subjectivities remain inaccessible to them. To the extent that victims of climate injustice include past, present, and future persons as members of the cross-generational moral

community, the work of restoring the conditions of that community may be directed in part by the subjectivities of past and present persons whose perspectives, preferences, and values may be comparatively better known to us. And the inaccessibility of future victims' subjectivities itself might be incorporated into intergenerational reparative justice as a methodological principle, a caution for epistemic humility. Among other things, such humility means pursuing open-ended and deliberately incomplete ways of making amends that allow for and actively invite future generations to revise and adapt these ameliorative practices as they see fit.

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