

# PHILOSOPHERS AND CLIMATE STRIKES

*A brief primer*

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The largest contributors to climate change are collective agents, such as governments and corporations. A growing wave of global climate strikes, led by young people, is calling for governments to work together to curb the worst effects of climate change and ensure a livable future for humans and other living creatures. Philosophers for Sustainability receives many inquiries from philosophers wondering how best to support these efforts. We also aim to support climate movements proactively, and encourage everyone in our field to support them. We have put together a brief introductory primer for philosophers about climate strikes. Comments are welcome to [philosophersforsustainability@gmail.com](mailto:philosophersforsustainability@gmail.com).

## **What are climate strikes?**

Climate strikes are coordinated protests demanding government action on climate change. They take place every Friday, and on some other days, with larger strikes every few months. The larger strikes are growing in size, with an estimated 1.6 million people participating in March 2019 and an estimated 7.6 million people in September 2019. Thousands of events are planned for a massive strike on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day, April 22, 2020.

Climate strikes are led largely by young people. They are not traditional strikes by a single union of workers. They are global, and many strikers are students. Climate strikes are an organized withholding of labor and cooperation, and they often carry a cost. Some students are able to participate with no penalty; others are penalized by their schools or families, some moderately, others heavily. Many local strikes have specific demands, particular to their community. Many climate strikes encourage voter registration and pledges to vote. Most climate strikes are also recruiting events, aiming to rapidly build a movement of larger and larger climate strikes.

## **Why should I support climate strikes?**

According to the United Nations' 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, limiting global warming to an average of 1.5°C (2.7°F) requires “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.”<sup>1</sup> In July 2019, a network of over 7,000 colleges and universities declared a climate emergency.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, government and corporate responses do not yet address the urgency or the scale of the emergency, and many do not see it as in their interest to do so. Scientific consensus alone does not lead to decisive government action, and sometimes leads to no action at all. To ensure a collective response that matches the scale of the crisis, large-scale public pressure is essential.

Philosophers are exceptionally well positioned to support climate strikes. Our teaching and writing give us access to large numbers of people, and especially to young people. We can integrate strike support into our other activities in ways that take relatively little added time, bring significant numbers of people to the strikes, and create opportunities for learning and discussion that fit well with our other goals. Climate strikes also offer a way to show our students and children that we care about them and are fighting for them. They also counteract powerlessness, isolation, and an individualistic focus on one's own carbon footprint. They are interesting in themselves, and can have a much greater impact on climate change than changes in individual consumption do.

## **How can I support climate strikes?**

You can support climate strikes as an individual, as a teacher, and as a writer. You can attend, recruit, donate, teach, and write about climate strikes. Below are some suggestions. Pick a few and try them, preferably with one or more other people! If you have questions or want to get in touch with other philosophers in your area who might be involved, feel free to write to us at [philosophersforsustainability@gmail.com](mailto:philosophersforsustainability@gmail.com).

### **Attending a climate strike**

Attending a climate strike is already a contribution. Your presence is part of a growing social movement. Attending can also feel awkward or unfamiliar at first, both for you and for your students and other young people. Direct political action is new to many of us. Figuring out how to just be there may be enough of a goal for your first strike. If you are not sure what to do, you can listen and observe; you can clap; you can join a chant; you can find someone enthusiastic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/2018/10/08/summary-for-policymakers-of-ipcc-special-report-on-global-warming-of-1-5c-approved-by-governments/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-climate-emergency/letter/thousands-of-schools-and-universities-declare-climate-emergency-idUSKCN1U52PH>

and stay near them; you can bring a noisemaker or sign and carry it. You can ask yourself some questions to help take in the event. Who is here? What messages should we take from this? What local organizations are involved, and what are they asking for? How can I communicate with people about this strike today and afterwards, including people who might disagree with the strike or not understand it? You can also invite someone to join you who you think could be a good person to experience the strike with, and whose company you enjoy.

Most ways of attending a climate strike carry a very low or negligible risk of harm or arrest. Occasional high-risk activities by smaller groups are typically organized in advance with the consent, planning, and training of those who participate. If you are not sure whether attending your local strike would risk harm or arrest, it can be useful to ask yourself what you need to know, and to look into your rights and local laws and contact strike organizers if needed.

As you become more familiar with climate strikes, you can begin to think about engaging fellow protesters, bringing extra signs and more people, and offering your students or colleagues to attend with them. Your ability to play an active role will grow as your familiarity grows. You will find it easier to help others to meaningfully participate.

## **Recruiting**

Tell your friends, your relatives, your neighbors, your co-workers, and especially your classes about an upcoming strike. Tell people why you think they matter. Invite them to join you!

Several different formats can be useful:

- Make a brief announcement at the beginning of your classes, and ask who is interested in coming. If appropriate, exchange contact information, or make a plan. You might have strike leaders in your classes; if anyone seems enthusiastic, invite them to briefly speak to the class.

- Better yet, contact a local strike organizer or youth climate organization, on or off campus, and invite them to make a brief announcement to your classes. Young people are often inspired by meeting other young people who are active in climate organizing. Some of these groups have representatives who are eager to come and speak to classes for any length of time.

- Even better, contact as many teachers as you can and encourage them to announce the strikes, or have young leaders make announcements. Make it easy for them by providing a template or a copy of your announcement.

- Talk to young people informally, one on one or in small groups, about climate strikes. Personal contact is consistently the most effective way to recruit.

When announcing or recruiting, it is good practice to keep diversity, inclusion, and equity in mind. We want as many people joining as possible, but we also want communities of color, poor people, and other frontline populations well represented and in a central role. It is also good to use a diversity of formats. Some combination of class announcements, in-person interaction, emails, phone calls, texts, flyers on your office door, and social media may work better for you and others than sticking to just one format. Keep in mind that most of the people you talk to still will not RSVP for a strike, and many who RSVP will not come. Reminders and enthusiasm are very helpful. If people cannot come, you can ask them to spread the word. Reach out to many people, and be creative!

## **Teaching**

It often works well to integrate an upcoming climate strike into your teaching. You have many options. Can you devote one full class to the strike? Can you offer a creative assignment that includes attending a strike as a requirement or as an option? Can you cancel class during a strike, or organize a teach-in or discussion instead of or in addition to your class? Can you help encourage teachers and institutions not penalize students for striking? Strikes come with costs, but most student strikers are not aiming at suspension or low grades. Helping to reduce the costs is an important way to support and grow the strikes.

On a larger scale, very many philosophers can fruitfully integrate climate strikes into our syllabi. These strikes address an existential threat that is already affecting most aspects of life. Climate change, and climate strikes in particular, are tied to philosophical topics ranging from justice, to the interpretation of scientific evidence, to logical fallacies, to the contributions of underrepresented traditions in philosophy. They make these issues vivid and connect them to real life. Almost every course can consider them at least to some extent, in ways that benefit both the strikes and the course.

## **Writing**

Most philosophers are writers, and climate strikes offer plenty to write about. Environmental and political philosophers, among many others, can write whole articles or books about them. Many other philosophers can find less obvious but just as fruitful connections. A discussion of the value of truth, or of adolescent development, can find much to say about them. By integrating

climate strikes, and climate change more generally, into our writing, we take the lead in treating them as central topics of our time.

Climate strikes also offer an excellent opportunity for writing shorter pieces, regardless of specialization. You have many years of training in crafting convincing arguments. Can you write an op-ed in your city or campus newspaper? Can you contribute a reflection on climate change to a national or international philosophy blog? Can you write a statement, or a draft department policy, and circulate it for signatures and support? Can you write a tweet, or ten tweets? Do you want to write a short testimonial? As one forum for these writings, Philosophers for Sustainability is collecting short testimonials from philosophers, of 100-300 words each, into a short collection called “Why Philosophers Care about Climate Change,” to be distributed together with this primer once we have several of them. We would love to read one by you.

## **Youth leadership**

Climate strikes put us in a particular relationship with young people. In our daily jobs, many philosophers lead young people. In many climate strikes, young people lead. This is a good thing. As a frontline population disproportionately impacted by climate change, young people belong in the center of the climate movement. They have a more powerful sense of the importance of taking action than many older people do. Their leadership helps to remind everyone why we should care about climate change. Their mobilization can effectively shift elections.

Young leaders take on large burdens and are often vulnerable. They face many attacks, and many suggestions from older adults who do not take the time to get to know them or follow their lead. It is helpful to take care not to impose one’s own agenda on young leaders. Even when meant well, this imposition is usually a form of adultism, functioning to disempower, discourage, and confuse its targets just like sexism, racism, and other oppressions do. Although asking young leaders about self-care can be a good form of support, it is important not to encourage young leaders to be less bold. Climate strikes need help to grow quickly and match the scale of the crisis. A good practice is to contact strike organizers, ask them what support they need, and enthusiastically offer it if you are able to, or help find others who can.

On the other hand, youth leadership does not mean that older adults should not participate (except for some youth-only events) or should not use our access as teachers to make announcements or encourage young people to become involved in climate strikes. For many of us, using our power to encourage youth leadership is part of our job, written into the mission statement of our institutions. And climate strikes need everyone.

## Join the campaign

In Spring 2020, Philosophers for Sustainability is launching a discipline-wide campaign to coordinate support for climate strikes, including video forums, part of an e-conference, this primer, a collection of testimonials, a social media campaign, a climate strike support team, and most importantly, a coordinated effort to support young people's participation in the strikes. We want this campaign to be sustainable—to be feasible, interesting, and enjoyable—to allow it to keep growing and to model some aspect of the world we hope to ensure for future generations. We would love for you to join us. And whether or not you join us, we would love to support your efforts. You can find us at <http://www.philosophersforsustainability.com/>, or by email at [philosophersforsustainability@gmail.com](mailto:philosophersforsustainability@gmail.com). Please feel free to be in contact with us. Thank you, and good luck!

