**Collective action to address global environmental problems**

Wouter Peeters

Lecturer in Global Ethics, University of Birmingham

w.peeters@bham.ac.uk

**Abstract**

Reducing humanity’s impact on the natural environment is a collective action problem, in that it cannot be achieved by just one agent but rather requires the cooperation of agents around the globe. It seems, though, that there is a tendency in the literature as well as the public debate, to single out one type of agent – collective institutions, individual agents or companies – coupled with scepticism about the agency and responsibility of other types of agents.

First, it has been argued in the literature that tackling global environmental problems is mainly, or exclusively, the job of collective (political) institutions because they would have to lead on this cooperation. Similarly, in the public discourse, the belief that institutions are in the best place to solve global environmental problems is prevalent. On the other hand, however, an important section of for example the climate ethics literature focuses on the responsibility of individual agents. Moreover, paradoxically, even though it is implicitly accepted that individual actions are inconsequential, there also many individuals and households who nonetheless take individual actions to reduce their environmental impact by. Finally, there is a tendency to single out the “carbon majors,” the most polluting corporations and focus on their responsibility in, for example, the causation of climate change.

In this paper, I argue that focussing on only one type of agent – collective institutions, individuals, or corporations – is inaccurate as well as counterproductive. There are two main reasons for this, related to agency and responsibility respectively. First, the different types of agents have also different types of agency, and can take completely different actions to reduce humanity’s impact on the environment. These actions sometimes are preconditions for the actions of other types of agents, but they can also be complementary, mutually reinforcing or facilitating other actions. Singling out one type of agent ignores these relations between different types of agents and actions, while all of them will be necessary to tackle global environmental problems.

Second, when holding an agent responsible for tackling a problem (whether it is on the basis of a fault or a no-fault principle), there is always a tendency or risk that this agent will try to evasion this responsibility. This is particularly at issue in large collective action problems, of which global environmental problems are paradigm examples. There are so many agents involved that each agent’s contribution, taken in isolation, seems trivial. In addition, singling out one type of agent facilitates other agents in displacing their own responsibility. Hence, the focus on one type of agent allows the evasion of responsibility and passing the buck around in circles.

In sum, in collective action problems, all agents involved (7.8 billion individuals, all of the political institutions and all the corporations) are cogs in the machine. Solving global environmental problems depends on substantial actions undertaken by all agents who have agency, to the extent that they have this agency. Acknowledging the agency and responsibility of all agents – rather than singling out one type of agent and being sceptical about the agency and responsibility of other agents – will allow us to identify complementary actions and mutually reinforcing synergies between agents, as well as decrease the tendency of displacing responsibility.

**Biography**

I obtained my PhD from Vrije Universiteit Brussel in December 2014 with a dissertation on individual freedoms and responsibilities in climate change. Since September 2016, I am a Lecturer in Global Ethics at the University of Birmingham. My main research interests are climate change, global justice, and environmental sustainability. I also dabble in intersubjective ethics.