Climate Change and the Politics of Responsibility

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This article theorizes the politics of responsibility—activist struggles over who will be held accountable for structural injustices like the "catastrophic" changes underway in our climate. To do so, it develops a politicized conception of responsibility, one that treats responsibility as a social construct and a terrain of contestation. Building on the work of feminist philosophers of responsibility and on the praxis of "kayaktivism," this politicized account treats responsibility as a social practice of interrogating and contesting shared ethico-political judgments. On this understanding, taking responsibility or stepping up is a way of *making* responsibility—literally of (re)constructing those social practices and judgments through conscious efforts to persuade others, challenge prevailing norms and interpretations, change people's beliefs about how the world works, revise popular expectations of social actors and institutions, and disrupt business as usual. The article highlights the centrality of norms and power to social practices of responsibility and suggests alternative perspectives on familiar philosophical worries about blame, complexity and agency, and justification.

The politics of responsibility refers to activist struggles over who will be held accountable for structural injustices like the "catastrophic" changes underway in our climate, changes that the most recent reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change tell us are "inevitable" and "irreversible" (IPCC 2021; 2022a; 2022b).[1] These struggles—in this case comprising everything from Fridays for Future to anti-pipeline protests and public "die-ins"—have received relatively scant attention from political theorists and philosophers. The field's mainstream climate ethics literature treats responsibility as a moral problem; it explores—primarily using the techniques of analytical philosophy—who should be held responsible, why, and in what way; that is, it seeks "to provide better understanding of the requirements of morality" (Cripps 2013, 19, citing McDermott). I call this the *just emissions* approach to highlight both its goal of determining a fair or just distribution of the costs of mitigation, adaption, and compensation and its narrow focus on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (cf. Sardo 2020, 6). The *just emissions* approach differs markedly from *climate* or *environmental justice* approaches, which engage in structural critique and consider a much broader range of climate and related environmental injustices (Foran 2016; Pulido and De Lara 2018; Schlosberg and Collins 2014).[2]

Whatever their other virtues, these approaches provide limited insight into the politics of responsibility.[3] Just emissions theorists typically focus on individual and collective emissions and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process, the diplomatic structure through which climate negotiations among parties to the convention take place. Environmental justice theorists recognize social movements as essential vehicles of social transformation but focus on the structural criticisms leveled by these movements or on specific movement campaigns. Scholars taking the latter approach treat responsibility variously as the core of a system of obligations (e.g., Whyte 2013), as a guide to just engagement (Ackerly 2018b), or as an ethos of care or solidarity that motivates critique and activism (e.g., Sultana 2021). In contrast, this article develops a politicized conception of responsibility that treats it as a social construct and a terrain of contestation. Its key insight, put succinctly, is that in taking responsibility activists are not merely following established moral prescriptions but are in fact *making* responsibility—challenging and reworking its normative substance and social meaning through strategic discursive intervention. Building on the work of feminist philosophers of responsibility and on the praxis of "kayaktivism"—protests that deploy small

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people-powered watercraft to blockade ports, disrupt shipping and trade, or otherwise dramatize wider climate injustices—my politicized account highlights the centrality of norms and power to social practices of responsibility and suggests alternative perspectives on familiar philosophical worries about blame, complexity and agency, and justification. This focus on how power and practice shape norms of responsibility differentiates my approach from existing accounts and significantly extends the work of earlier theorists on which I build.

Kayaktivism is in some respects typical of social mobilizations engaged in nonviolent direct action around climate change and other issues. I am interested in it, however, for other reasons. Specifically, it exemplifies—and it has shaped my formulation of—the conceptualization of responsibility developed here. Kayaktivism foregrounds an avowedly *politicized* understanding of responsibility in which participants explicitly contest prevailing normative accounts of responsibility and propose and enact alternatives. They do so not merely as a way of taking personal responsibility for structural injustice or of holding bad actors accountable but primarily as a collective project that challenges and seeks to alter the wider social meaning of responsibility itself. Put differently, I focus extensively on this example not because it is a singular instance of nonviolent direct action but rather because kayaktivism informs, enriches, and exemplifies the theoretical framework I am developing and attests to its plausibility as a theoretical account of the politics of responsibility: it serves as an illustrative case or "proof of concept." Many kayaktivists are thoughtful and reflective about their strategies and tactics, making this a particularly compelling case with which to theorize and illustrate my argument.[4]

To be clear, I do not claim that grounding the case in real-world politics justifies or validates either the politicized conception or the substantive notion of responsibility that kayaktivists advocate. I do, however, believe that paying attention to "the epistemic agency and creativity of ordinary people" can help identify important questions about and perspectives on responsibility that might otherwise go unasked or remain obscure (Doan 2020, 207–8).[5]

Responsibility, Politicized

As Eckersley (2016, 355) observes, most discussions of climate ethics "have been confined to the morality rather than politics of assigning responsibility." Recently, she, Sardo (2020), and others have embraced Iris Marion Young's social connection model of responsibility (SCM) as an alternative. The idea animating the SCM is that connection engenders responsibility: "individuals bear responsibility for structural injustice because they contribute by their actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes" (Young 2011, 105); "we bear responsibility because we are part of the process" (Young 2006, 119). In Young's view, all who contribute by their actions to structural processes that produce injustice have what she calls a *political responsibility* to work to remedy those injustices (103, 114).

Responsibility is political for Young in two distinct but related ways. First, although connection engenders personal responsibility for outcomes, that responsibility is shared (see May 1992).[6] This means that "the harms are produced by many of us acting together within accepted institutions and practices"; as a result, it is impossible to "identify just what in our own actions results in which aspects of the injustice that particular individuals suffer" (Young 2011, 110; cf. Young 2006, 122). Second, to change these structures and processes, responsibility must be discharged politically—that is, jointly, in cooperation with others. We must organize collective action to reform unjust structures through "public communicative engagement" (123). In short, political responsibility for Young is shared responsibility discharged jointly through public discursive action.[7]

While Young did not apply the SCM to climate change, Vogel (2014, 18) argues that it maps "easily" onto this issue. Incorporating much of Young's own language, Vogel characterizes climate change as a structural problem whose complexity makes assigning blame problematic. The harms associated with climate change are described as unintentional, resulting from individuals and institutions pursuing their own interests largely within given rules and accepted norms, in ways that nonetheless hurt many people—particularly the "poor and marginalized"—by making them (more) vulnerable to systematic threats of domination and deprivation (18). What Eckersley, Sardo, Vogel and others find helpful in Young's approach is that it shifts theorists' evaluative focus from behavior to connection. According to Sardo (2020, 14–15), this shift transforms debates over responsibility for climate change by eliminating any reference to or reliance on causality, which bedevils familiar approaches to the problem.

This shift does not, however, transpose responsibility into politics. The SCM relies on a moral ontology of responsibility, albeit one different from the familiar view (see Goodhart 2018, chap. 7). In eliminating causality, the SCM in effect moralizes connection itself. It does so in explicit contrast with the familiar culpable causation model of moral responsibility—the view that agents are responsible for the wrongful effects of their blameworthy behavior. Young famously rejects this model as too backward-looking and inappropriately focused on blame; nonetheless, she too is concerned primarily with individual (shared) moral responsibility. That's why, for her, discursive action is a way of discharging responsibility we already have because of connection.

As a result, there is a tension in Young's approach between its moralized account of responsibility and its call for political action as a remedy for injustice.[8] We can glimpse that tension in her brief discussion of responsibility for homelessness:

> Discharging my responsibility in relation to the structural injustice of homelessness might involve… my trying to persuade others that this threat to well-being is a matter of injustice rather than misfortune and that we participate together in the processes that cause it. We then would enjoin one another to work on our collective relationships and try to transform the necessary practices. (Young 2011, 112)

We see here both Young's reliance on a moral ontology of individual responsibility, reflected in the notion that we have a responsibility to discharge, and her intimation of a social ontology of responsibility, expressed in the idea that, through persuasion, we might "transform the necessary practices" and "collective relationships" and thereby change people's thinking about homelessness.

Although she invited us to see transformative communicative action as a kind of political performance that brings about change, Young said little about how she understood such performances or about the transformation she hoped they would initiate (Pritzlaff 2018, 136). Perhaps because she regarded her primary challenge as showing *that* the many people casually involved in social-structural processes bear responsibility for the injustice those processes produce, or perhaps simply because she didn't have time, she never developed a social ontology of responsibility adequate for making sense of her own call for discursive action. Yet such an ontology is, I believe, consistent with and actually required by Young's account to accommodate both the transformative potential she saw in political activism and the possibility she introduced that responsibility itself might be redefined through discursive action (cf. Michaelis and Johnson 2018, 5).

To construct such an account, I turn to the work of other feminist thinkers, notably Marion Smiley, who conceptualize responsibility as a social practice.[9] Smiley (1992, 106ff., 227ff.) theorizes responsibility as a practical judgment that reflects both social norms and people's shared (or at least overlapping) beliefs about and interpretations of the world. To attribute responsibility is, on Smiley's view, to engage in a social practice that simultaneously reflects and constitutes the norms—understood broadly to include values, conventions, and expectations—prevalent in a particular social context. Conceiving of responsibility as social practice helps us appreciate that it is sometimes contested. One of Smiley's examples from 25 years ago remains sadly topical today: people disagree about who should be held responsible for property damage that occurs amid protests following well-publicized acts of police violence. Should it be the protesters? The police? The juries that acquit them? A racist society? (Smiley 1995). There is little dispute about who *causes* the damage;

disagreement arises because people have divergent beliefs about existing social arrangements and relationships and assess them according to different norms.

Smiley's view can be usefully framed within what Margaret Urban Walker (1997) called an "expressive-collaborative" model of morality, which treats morality not as a collection of supposedly objective and impartial universal principles but rather as a set of common normative understandings rooted in a specific social context. Morality, on this view, is a family of practices (not theories) that reveals what is valued in a society by making people accountable for it to one another—though not necessarily voluntarily (Walker 1997, 10). These practices are socially embedded and tightly intertwined; they are shared in that they are intersubjective—although as Walker (7) cautions, this "need not mean that they are endorsed by all or exist by the consent of those who live them, nor that all understand the same things about how they are maintained, and who bears their costs or reaps their benefits." In her view, "moral life" is "a continuing negotiation among people, a practice of mutually allotting, assuming, or deflecting responsibilities of important kinds, and understanding the implications of doing so" (9).

This expressive-collaborative view clarifies how social practices of responsibility might work, although, with Lorraine Code (2002, 169), I prefer to think of shared normative understandings as *ethico-political*, rather than moral, to emphasize their intersubjectivity, their relational character, and their contingency and malleability. This terminology also gibes with the expanded understanding of the politics of responsibility that I propose: a politics of conscious intervention that challenges, contests, and refashions extant norms and practices. Just as responsibility can be assigned, assumed, or dodged during the ongoing social negotiation of the practices that constitute our shared moral lives, so too can it be explicitly challenged and contested in hopes of changing those judgments and transforming practices. Thus, to comprehend responsibility as a complex ethico-political negotiation is to recognize it as thoroughly politicized. (This possibility is implicit in earlier accounts like those of Smiley and Walker, but it is little explored or developed by them.) Jamieson (2015, 36) seems to have something like a politicized understanding of responsibility in mind when he calls it "a contested site" where "conceptions of responsibility are constructed, and then mobilized for particular purposes." In such cases, as he recognizes, "arguments… are primarily a matter of persuading others to share one's outlook, rather than directed towards bringing others to see some fundamental truth about the nature of responsibility and the application of the concept" (36).

This politicized conception differs crucially from "political responsibility" in the SCM. Young already knows who is responsible: all of us who are connected to an injustice. For her the key is to persuade others to acknowledge this

and take up their responsibility. The politicized view shows that persuasion can be constitutive of responsibility, that activism can be a way not simply of taking responsibility but also of making it. So, while I agree with Young on the importance of persuasion and public communicative action, I see it as essential to theorize how persuasion works and what it takes to alter social practices of responsibility. Moreover, I think it is essential to treat power not simply as one of the "parameters of reasoning" that help us determine appropriate allocations of responsibility but also as one of the key political factors that helps determine what responsibility means and where it lies. I refer to this activity as *the politics of responsibility* to stress its discursive and activist dimensions and its contested, conflictual nature.

Kayaktivism

My thinking about a politicized conception of responsibility and about the politics of responsibility that it implies is informed by the example of kayaktivism: a kind of protest that involves "small manually powered water craft for the blocking of action or blockading of transported goods by large sea vessels," including "aquatic protests that use such small craft as sites for visual or verbal statements of opposition to policy or the assertion of power" (Westerman 2017, 109–10). In the discussion that follows, I show that kayaktivists operate with a politicized conception of responsibility and actively seek to change narratives and reconstruct shared practices of responsibility. To be clear, I do not claim that kayaktivism represents a correct or complete account of the politics of responsibility, which might take many forms; nor do I claim that kayaktivism is singular in its attention to what I call *making responsibility* for injustice. I discuss kayaktivism here because it is exemplary of the kind of politics one would expect to see from people acting on a politicized understanding of responsibility. This example thus indicates the plausibility of my account: it is an "illustrative case" of the politics of responsibility (see Levy 2008, 6).[10]

Kayaktivism originated in the early 1970s, when Quaker activists opposed to Pakistani repression in East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) used canoes and kayaks to blockade freighters shipping US weapons to Pakistani-backed forces (see Taylor 1977, chap. 6). From the start, these actions were part of a broader strategy for political change. Activists developed what Bill Moyer, one of the organizers, called "sociodramas" that "paint a clear picture of an injustice that violates widely accepted values" (69–70).[11] They also sought—and garnered—significant media attention, celebrity they leveraged to pressure Congress and educate politicians and the public. The broader strategy also included forging alliances with labor unions, especially the longshoremen (55ff.). Union support helped ensure that military shipments would not be loaded onto Pakistani freighters and added to the pressure on Congress.

Together, these tactics helped end US aid to Khan's regime (350.org n.d.-a).

Throughout the 1980s, kayaktivists in the Bay Area Peace Navy attempted to block warships from taking munitions from California to El Salvador; activists also paddled up the Rio San Juan in Nicaragua to protest nuclear weapons and US intervention (Westerman 2017, 113). The practice gained renewed global notoriety in 2014, when a group of 30 Pacific Islanders using traditional handmade craft and calling themselves the Pacific Climate Warriors formed a flotilla to blockade Newcastle, Australia, the world's largest coal port (figure 1). These Indigenous activists, hailing from 12 islands, were reacting to the existential threat posed to their homes and communities by rising sea levels resulting from anthropogenic climate change. The Pacific Climate Warriors were joined by hundreds of other activists, and although they could not ultimately prevent coal from leaving Newcastle, their action drew attention to the ongoing reliance on coal-based energy and inspired other activists (350.org n.d.-b).

Since then, climate activists have used this tactic with growing frequency. In 2015, Indigenous kayaktivists took to the River Seine during the Paris Climate Conference to demand that their rights be recognized explicitly in the agreement then under negotiation (Lukacs 2015). In April of that year, kayaktivists in the US Pacific Northwest tried to prevent Royal Dutch Shell from sending its Arctic drilling rig *Polar Pioneer* to explore for oil reserves in the warming waters off Alaska, a possibility enabled by the Obama administration's conditional approval of a resumption in offshore drilling (Holthaus 2015). This "Paddle in Seattle"—a riff on the famed 1999 "Battle in Seattle" where alt-globalization protestors shut down the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference—brought local and global activists to the water as part of a larger #ShellNo! campaign against Arctic oil exploration and climate change more generally. Kayaktivists in Portland, Oregon, joined the effort in July, when they learned that an icebreaker in port for repairs, the *MSV Fennica*, was about to depart for Shell's drilling site in the Chukchi Sea. Launching their protest in the Willamette River, they unfurled a giant floating banner reading "Defend the Arctic. Climate Justice Now." When the ship was underway, 13 Greenpeace activists rappelled from a bridge that spans the river, helping block the *Fennica*'s route to the open sea. Its departure was delayed for two days, and the protest received national and global media attention (Brait 2015). In September, Shell announced that it would "cease further exploration activity in offshore Alaska for the foreseeable future," citing economic factors and calling its exploration "disappointing." While denying that the protests had influenced its decision, "the company also blamed 'the challenging and unpredictable federal regulatory environment in offshore Alaska.' This atmosphere, of

Figure 1
Pacific Climate Warriors
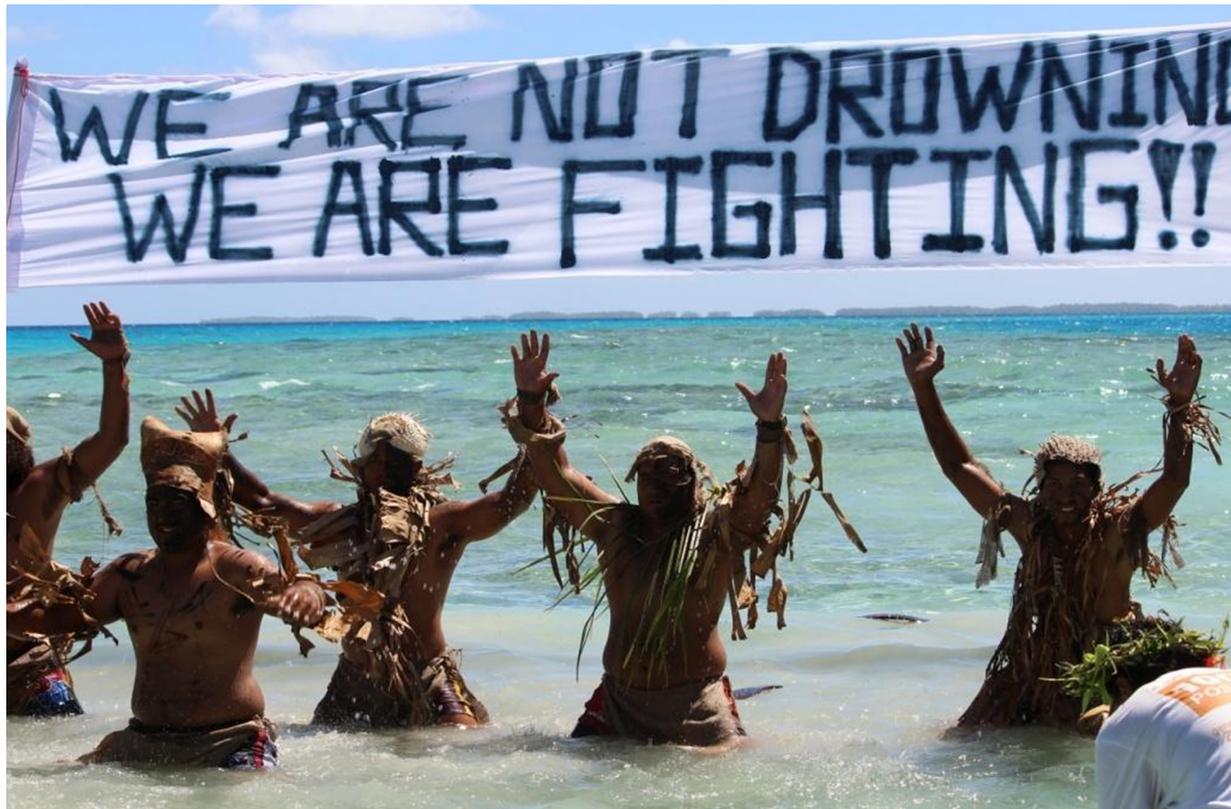
Source: https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/pacific-warriors-canoe-climate-change/

course, had been made challenging and unpredictable precisely because of outraged citizens" (Engler 2015).

Similar actions have proliferated since. Kayaktivists protested against construction of an oil trans-shipment facility (Kalliber 2016) and the development of two oil refineries (Le 2016) in the Pacific Northwest; interrupted delivery of key components for the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion, which would bring highly polluting Alberta Tar Sands oil to the Pacific Coast for shipment around the world (van der Voo 2019); boarded an oil rig in the Norwegian sea to demand an end to new drilling (Cockburn 2019); blocked the departure of a giant (and highly inefficient) cruise ship from Helsinki's Hernessari harbor (News Now Staff 2019); and protested a natural gas pipeline and other fossil fuel projects in New Jersey by paddling up the Navesink River to demonstrate near the dock behind the state governor's private mansion (Mancuso 2020).

Kayaktivists "aim to use the most dramatic tactics possible to highlight the consequences of corporate and government complicity in fossil fuel based affluence" (Connor 2012, 244), a clear echo of Moyer's "sociodrama." At the 2016 protest against the northern Washington State

refineries, Annette Klapstein, age 63, of the political organization Raging Grannies, explained, "We're putting our bodies in the gears of the fossil fuel economy to demand a just transition to the post-fossil fuel economy" (Le 2016). The Mosquito Fleet, a network of climate justice activists, uses "our bodies and boats to obstruct the commerce and transport of fossil fuels in service of dismantling an extractive economy" (Mosquito Fleet n.d.). Kayaktivism is, in short, a direct response to the "extraction, destruction, and pollution" entailed by fossil fuel use (Westerman 2017, 116).

These interventions target the corporations that extract and process those fuels and that build and maintain the infrastructure of the carbon economy. As Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, a Pacific Climate Warrior from the Republic of the Marshall Islands, put it, "The fossil fuel industry is the biggest threat to our very existence as Pacific Islanders. We stand to lose our homes, our communities, and our culture. But we are fighting back" (McNamara and Farbotko 2017, 20). By disrupting ports, pipelines, transportation networks, and other critical infrastructure, kayaktivists highlight "the consequences of corporate and government complicity in fossil fuel based affluence"

(Connor 2012, 244; Rising Tide Australia). They frequently mention attracting leaders' attention and making their voices heard as reasons for engaging in protest (Elizaga 2015; Soderberg 2015). They also seek to pressure public officials to take or reverse specific decisions—for example, about the use of ports (McGinn 2015), pipelines (Mancuso 2020), or carbon policy generally (Lukacs 2015; McGill 2014; Moyer n.d.). By forcing police and public safety personnel to intervene on the side of the polluters, protestors hope to reveal government complicity in climate change and bring about a change of position.

Kayaktivism dramatizes the existential threat that ongoing fossil fuel extraction and consumption pose to people and to the planet. Participants and journalists frequently highlight the "David vs. Goliath" imagery of kayaktivist blockades (figure 2); the watercraft themselves literally and figuratively represent "people power" in contrast to their carbon- and corporate-fueled targets. This juxtaposition also underscores the power differential between the opposing sides and vivifies the threats the carbon economy poses to personal and societal well-being through the danger the kayaktivists face on the water. The obvious risk undertaken by the activists attests to their sincerity and commitment, amplifying their persuasive power (as it did that of the Quaker "navy"). While actions on the water sometimes deliver tangible victories, such as blocking arms shipments to Pakistan or helping end Shell's arctic explorations, the disruption is the pretext, rather than the primary aim. Organizers and participants understand kayaktivism primarily as a tactic in a broader strategy for ending fossil fuel dependence and limiting the damage and suffering associated with climate change. That strategy, described in different but complementary ways by activists around the world, consists in effecting a "paradigm shift" toward holding major carbon economy corporations and their political allies responsible for their business model of "extraction, destruction, and pollution" for profit.

Many kayaktivists are explicit about their desire to instigate such a shift. For example, scientific and policy discussions frequently characterize Pacific Island Countries as "sinking," "drowning," or "doomed"; leading experts talk about mass relocation as a necessary "adaptation" (McNamara and Farbotko 2017, 18). The Pacific Climate Warriors refuse this fatalism. Their slogan, "We are not drowning, we are fighting," rejects acquiescence in the destruction of their homes and ways of life. Fenton Lutunatabua, a Climate Warrior from Fiji, explains, "The whole reason we exist is to change the narrative, to show that we are not mere victims of climate change, and that we're not ready to flee our countries. We really want to fight; we want to hold people accountable. Most of all, using the voices of people at the front lines of climate change, we want to build the anti-narrative" (Cronin 2016).

The Backbone Campaign, the grassroots group behind the Paddle in Seattle, likewise frames its work as a "battle between paradigms": "One paradigm idolizes capital, gives corporations rights, and considers everything For Sale. It

Figure 2
The "Paddle in Seattle" (photo credit: ©Marcus Donner/Greenpeace)

Source: https://grist.org/climate-energy/i-kayaked-to-shell-and-back-heres-what-i-learned//

commodifies people, democracy, communities, and the planet itself. The paradigm we fight for is one in which people communities and nature and our obligation to future generations are considered sacred, and clearly NOT for sale" (Backbone Campaign n.d.).

Bill Moyer (no relation to the Quaker activist), founder and executive director of the Backbone Campaign, understands kayaktivism as one factor in a larger "political calculus." Backbone aims to "shift what is politically possible" by changing "the social, political, or economic variables" through its actions and demonstrations (Moyer n.d.). As he said in an interview with MSNBC, "We're fighting a battle that we can only win if we engage and inspire the imaginations and the sympathies of the masses of people" (MSNBC 2015, 4:48).

Organizations like 350.org and GoFossilFree encourage activists to "fight iconic battles against fossil fuel infrastructure," with the specific aim of hastening this shift. Rob West, a biomedical researcher and Seattle resident who joined the Paddle in Seattle, described the protest as primarily symbolic but explained, "What we hope to be able to do is just change the conversation, really, to be able to get people to start thinking of and doing the things that will enable us to eventually turn the tide" (Elizaga 2015, 1:22). Reflecting on this action, journalist Mark Engler (2015) observed, "This is what effective protest does. It alters public perception of what is acceptable. It hikes the costs of conducting immoral business. And it makes the political approval of wanton and destructive extraction less certain."

Kayaktivists recognize that local victories without accompanying structural change are insufficient. The discursive transformation they seek is not merely rhetorical. As Caitlin of Rising Tide Australia explained, their aim is to "shift the debate along" with the "ultimate objective" of "changing the structure of our society, our economic system, and people's value systems" (Connor 2012, 240). According to April of Climate Action Newcastle (Australia), activists "need to engage with people's hearts as well as their minds" (247). The profundity of this shift they seek was neatly expressed by Milan̄ Loeak, a Marshallese Climate Warrior, who said that she understands the work not as creating a better world for our children but rather as creating better children for our world (McNamara and Farbotko 2017, 21).

Many kayaktivists recognize their privileged social positions and see local action as part of a wider movement in solidarity with those who most directly feel the impact of climate change. Milla Prince, a kayaktivist in Seattle, explained that she was taking part "out of solidarity… with local native tribes [whose land is threatened by Shell's plans to drill]… but also out of solidarity for all people on earth," especially those in the global south who are being affected most quickly and directly by climate change (Elizaga 2015, 4:12). Emily Johnston, a veteran organizer,

described a responsibility that the "lucky" and "privileged" people of Seattle have to work on behalf of those around the world already suffering much more severe effects of climate change (McGinn 2015, 20:08). "I was born into this responsibility of putting my body on the line for environmental and social justice," said Reginald J. R. Gillins Jr., Greenpeace activist and Seattle resident. He continued, "People of color experience the effects of fossil fuel projects like Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain expansion first. I am protesting at Kinder Morgan [sic] facility in solidarity with Coast Salish folks right here in Seattle, but also all over the world who will be impacted by the reckless plans of companies like Kinder Morgan" (Greenpeace 2018).

For Samantha Suarez, another Greenpeace activist who joined the Kinder Morgan protest, solidarity with oppressed peoples, protection of nature, and responsibility to the future fused together. The pipeline, she said, "tramples Indigenous rights, threatens communities and their access to clean water, and the increased tanker traffic from the pipeline could decimate marine wildlife including the 76 remaining Southern Resident orcas. Taking action today is my responsibility so that the next generations know what an orca looks like. We have to stand up to these companies and say enough is enough" (Greenpeace 2018).

Kayaktivism and the Politics of Responsibility For Climate Change

Seen from a social movement perspective, kayaktivism may appear similar to other forms of mobilization: their "performances" seek to make structural injustice more widely legible and comprehensible, they use "iconic battles" and David/Goliath imagery to highlight power differentials and personal risk, and they strive to hold powerful actors to account. They do all of this, moreover, with an eye toward generating media-friendly visuals and narratives and winning sympathy for the larger cause.

My interest in kayaktivism—beyond sympathetic admiration—is in its broader discursive strategy. Kayaktivists clearly understand that individual protests, demonstrations, and other actions—even if they are successful in capturing headlines or in delaying or disrupting the normal operations of the carbon economy—are not enough. Their activism is carefully conceived to sharpen ethico-political tensions and to clarify social choices about who should be held responsible for climate change and why. This strategy goes beyond framing by seeking to change the dominant narrative about individual consumption and emissions, one that absolves fossil fuel companies and governments from responsibility. To be clear: kayaktivists are not demanding that fossil fuel corporations be held to existing standards of responsibility; instead, they are demanding a revision of those standards, seeking to change the meaning of responsibility itself.

Put differently, kayaktivist praxis intentionally seeks to reconstruct responsibility according to a new normative logic; it is a conscious, explicit effort to shift the discursive paradigm to one focused on the carbon economy itself and on those who enable and profit from it. Their activism shows that they regard responsibility as socially constructed, an object the very meaning of which is contestable. This understanding is powerfully illustrated in the staging of "socio-dramas" to depict injustice and provoke public reflection, a tactic reminiscent of Brechtian techniques of "defamiliarization" (see Goodhart 2018, 4–5; cf. Mills 2005). Let me be clear that this political project in no way excludes more familiar aims, such as raising consciousness about the existential threat posed by continued use of fossil fuels. The important point for my purposes, however, is that kayaktivists attempt to redefine or reconstruct responsibility itself: their various tactics are elements of a wider strategy of thoughtful political intervention that challenges, contests, and ultimately seeks to refashion social norms and practices of (ir)responsibility for climate change. In short, kayaktivism exhibits a politics of responsibility that lends plausibility to the politicized conception of responsibility introduced earlier.[12]

In this section, drawing on both the kayaktivist case and the preceding theoretical discussion, I consider how my politicized approach offers new perspectives on some core issues in the contemporary debates on responsibility for structural injustices like climate change. I consider four such issues here.

Forward-Looking Responsibility and Blame

A common position articulated in debates about responsibility for structural injustice is that assigning blame and guilt is inappropriate in such cases. The thought is that it is inapposite to blame people for engaging in routine, seemingly benign behavior that conforms to accepted rules and conventions. Assigning blame is (morally) improper and risks triggering defensiveness, blame-shifting, and evasion of responsibility on the part of those who may (reasonably) feel that they have done nothing wrong (Neuhäuser 2014, 236; Young 2004, 379; 2011, 95–123).[13] With respect to climate change, it proves difficult to show what, precisely, individuals do wrong in emitting GHGs. We know that *collective* GHG emissions harm the environment, but any *individual's* contribution to the problem is so infinitesimally small as to be causally—and thus morally—insignificant (Jamieson 2014, 162–64; Sinnott-Armstrong 2010).[14] Individuals' GHG emissions are, in a sense, "harmless," despite their cumulative adverse effects, because they are so small, so diffuse, and so remote in space and time from any harms to which they might contribute (Jamieson 2010, 83). Indeed, Jamieson (2014, 176) holds that most behavior related to climate change "is [not] in the domain of moral evaluation in the first place," by which he means that that behavior meets neither the causal nor the moral thresholds established by familiar culpable causation models of responsibility. Calls "to revise our conceptions of responsibility such that these behaviors would count as morally wrong" leave Jamieson unmoved, primarily because they require us to "moralize" climate-change–related behavior (170).

These considerations lead many scholars to embrace "forward-looking," results-oriented accounts of responsibility; Jamieson's (2015) proposed *intervention responsibility*,[15] for example, focuses exclusively on solutions while bracketing questions about the causes of climate change and who is to blame for it. Forward-looking models start with present conditions and look "to the future elimination of structural injustice through future action" (Neuhäuser 2014, 241). Because structural injustice is understood as the result of irreducibly collective behavior for which responsibility is necessarily shared, "forward-looking *collective* responsibility is a matter of taking responsibility for what will happen in the future by undertaking collective action in the present with an eye to future consequences" (Rovane 2014, 22). Other scholars have been sharply critical of forward-looking approaches. Nussbaum (2009) argues that there are compelling normative and political reasons to preserve blame as an important part of our thinking about responsibility. Langlois (2014) agrees, observing that, in the case of the anti-sweatshop advocacy that inspired Young, activists have achieved the best results by leveraging a liability framework to hold corporations to account. Eckersley (2016), thinking specifically about climate change, worries that forward-looking accounts risk erasing historical responsibility and will be unable to appropriately take the normative and political significance of past GHG emissions into account.

In the past, I sided with critics who insist on the political value of blame (Goodhart 2017), but kayaktivists have pushed me to think that the entire debate is ill conceived. These activists have a forward-oriented agenda that addresses the central cause of climate injustice: our carbon-based economy. Their demand to eradicate fossil fuels and transform that economy is clearly forward-looking and results oriented. Its logic is scientifically sound. It requires (massive) collective action. And yet it is anchored in a clear account of how the behavior of carbon corporations is directly and causally responsible (which is not to say entirely or exclusively responsible) for the current crisis: their historical and ongoing operations produce the GHGs that drive global warming. The claim of historical culpability is hardly far-fetched: the so-called Carbon Majors—one hundred large companies involved in oil, coal, and gas extraction, as well as in cement manufacturing—account for an astonishing 71% of total GHG emissions since 1988, a period in which more than half the total emissions above the preindustrial baseline

occurred (Griffin 2017). Historically, 90 corporations produced roughly 63% of *all* carbon dioxide emissions from 1854–2010 (Heede 2014, 234–35). Even if the Carbon Majors do not themselves burn the fuels or pour the cement, the continuation of anything like their present mode of operations—profiting from the extraction, refinement, and sale of fossil fuels and related carbon products—spells disaster for people and for the planet as we know it.

The kayaktivists' demand that carbon corporations be held responsible for climate change thus incorporates blame into a forward-looking conception of responsibility—a chimera in the terms of the present debate. Their retrospective judgment informs the targets of their activism, their program for action, and their strategy for organizing and mobilizing people. By protesting new fossil fuel infrastructure, they hope to illustrate that breaking our reliance on fossil fuels and transforming our carbon economy are the only sure means to mitigate climate change. The kayaktivists' approach confirms that responsibility is Janus-faced, combining evaluation (of past and present facts) and prescription (about what should be done in the future) in an account of why some obligations should be attributed to particular agents (Isaacs 2014). This is clear in the case of the culpable causation framework or "liability model" of responsibility, which ties past behavior prescriptively to (future) redress. Even what might appear to be wholly forward-looking principles of responsibility—such as Jamieson's *intervention responsibility*—rely on factors grounded in the past and present (proximity, capacity, accumulation) in making the case for some future behavior (payment, resettlement).

Accounts of responsibility differ significantly in *how* they link the past to the present: Which past behavior and present circumstances are relevant? What relationship exists between those facts and various modes of redress? Yet each account ties the past and present normatively to the future. Kayaktivists use blame effectively as a tool, making a crucial distinction (lost in most of the literature on forward-looking responsibility) between the motivating and mobilizing effect of blame *on those who are being blamed* and its effect *on others*, who might see themselves as victims of bad behavior or simply feel obligated to help. Kayaktivists avoid directly blaming individuals for their complicity in the carbon economy but nonetheless use their critique of carbon companies to galvanize people against new carbon infrastructure and to engender support for meaningful alternatives—alternatives that would require significant changes in individual behavior and lifestyle.

The notion that blaming might be politically effective also finds support in the literature. In a recent review, McAdam (2017) highlighted some advantages that anti-fossil fuel activism might enjoy relative to other, more general frames and narratives for mobilizing people around climate change, such as fear and individual responsibility.

He noted that, given the structural nature of the problem, it can be helpful to have clear targets for activism, which carbon companies provide; in addition, the specificity of the short-term aims of anti-fossil fuel activism—"don't drill here," "stop this pipeline"—can help activists achieve the small victories that sustain movements over the long haul (204–5).[16] Similarly, Sardo's (2020) analysis of fossil fuel divestment campaigns illustrates that there are practical advantages in leveraging liability as a political tool. Kayaktivism provides further grounds for overthrowing current assumptions about blame and forward-looking responsibility.

Complexity and Agency

Much of the debate about responsibility for structural injustice is consumed with questions of agency. Theorists and philosophers worry that what I have previously described as the empirical complexity, ethical ambiguity, and epistemological uncertainty surrounding structural injustice make it impossible or, at least, inappropriate to hold individual agents responsible for it (see Goodhart 2017, 175). To classify some injustice as *structural* is already in a sense to conclude that no one is to blame for it. This kind of thinking certainly pervades debates on responsibility for climate change (e.g., Kagan 2011; Sardo 2020; Sinnott-Armstrong 2010). As Shockley (2020, 491) puts it, aggregated climate-changing behavior might destroy the world without any individual agent bearing moral responsibility for its destruction.

Kayaktivists and other anti-fossil fuel activists directly challenge this way of thinking in targeting carbon corporations. As we have seen, they blame these firms for their historical emissions and for a business model that promises to lock in further emissions for decades to come. Activists' insistence on corporate responsibility raises important questions about the individualistic focus of mainstream discussions of responsibility for climate change and for structural injustice more generally. It also reveals how a programmatically individualistic treatment of complexity can erase agency and responsibility altogether in some instances.

It is frankly bewildering, given the emissions figures for the Carbon Majors cited earlier, that corporate responsibility for climate change receives so little attention in the mainstream climate ethics literature.[17] This neglect of corporate responsibility is all the more surprising because the idea is long established and relatively uncontroversial, unlike the raging debate about the nature and grounds of collective responsibility.[18] There is wide agreement that firms possess all the normative features and capacities for intentional action required to qualify them as moral agents in the familiar sense (the definitive work is French 1979). One reader of this article suggested that this inattention may reflect the statist focus of international climate

negotiations (the UNFCCC process) that link responsibility to aggregate (individual) emissions. That is perhaps plausible,[19] although theorists and philosophers are hardly famous for withholding criticism of ethical and political frameworks that they find problematic or for reticence when it comes to proposing alternatives. Besides, the silence on corporate responsibility is not new, and it is not confined to climate change: corporations and capital are rarely mentioned, let alone scrutinized, in philosophical discussions of poverty, racism, homelessness, or other structural injustices—at least by mainstream scholars.

My point is not that the Carbon Majors are responsible for climate change because the kayaktivists say that they are. It is rather that the politics of responsibility in which kayaktivists and others engage puts into sharp relief the extreme metaphysical and methodological individualism of mainstream thinking about responsibility for climate change (see Rovane 2014) and other structural injustices; this (mainly liberal) individualism systematically shields corporate behavior from critical scholarly attention (Lavin 2008). To put this another way, our social practices of responsibility are such that we hold corporations responsible for little besides defective products and overtly discriminatory treatment of individual employees. As I argue later, the politicized approach enables and obliges us to consider this fact in terms of the power relations that permeate the politics of responsibility.

Metaphysical and methodological individualism create a false dichotomy between complexity and culpability in mainstream approaches to responsibility. They also explain the leap from the identification of structural complexity to conclusions about the need for new models of collective (individual) responsibility, a leap that carries many critics right past egregious instances of blameworthy behavior. Even skeptics who might question whether it is "fair" to hold carbon corporations responsible for their historical GHG emissions will find it difficult to excuse the lies and fraud they have perpetrated in connection with climate change over many years. It is well documented that in the late 1980s, citizens, governments, and even many business leaders understood the threat of anthropogenic planetary warming and were preparing to take significant action to reduce emissions.[20] NASA scientist James Hansen's famous 1988 congressional testimony was less a revelation than a codification of growing warnings and mounting evidence.[21] At precisely this time, some of the largest polluters launched a coordinated, lavishly financed, and scientifically bogus campaign of climate denial modeled on the PR strategy of Big Tobacco, initiating a tragic and enraging story of ongoing denial, obfuscation, and intransigence (see, among many, Hoggan and Littlemore 2009; Oreskes 2011). The chief carbon corporations have known for decades that their business drives climate change that has catastrophic effects. Moreover, they have lied, and

continue to lie, about these facts as part of their ongoing strategy of denial and obstruction, as recent revelations newly demonstrate (Franta 2021; McGreal 2022). In this context, the widespread philosophical silence on corporate responsibility is all the more striking.

Scholars and activists working in the environmental justice paradigm avoid this distortional individualism. Their analyses reveal how systems like capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy create and perpetuate injustices in many spheres (e.g., Rice, Long, and Levenda 2021; Whyte 2017)—including, unavoidably, how extractive industries like oil and gas drive both climate change and environmental racism (e.g., Yusoff 2018). Climate and environmental justice scholars thus refocus critical attention on structures in ways that emphasize the historical responsibility of corporations, settlers, governments, and others. Their analyses also laud the role of social movements in challenging specific injustices and effecting broader change (Pulido and De Lara 2018). As Sultana (2021, 119–21) puts it, climate justice is a praxis and has always involved movements; to be successful, these movements must be intersectional and engage substantively and continuously with the communities directly affected by specific injustices. This kind of place-based social movement praxis requires flexibility and adaptability, especially at (and perhaps favoring) the local level (Schlosberg and Collins 2014). Environmental justice scholarship thus spotlights the political arena and recognizes that the fight for climate justice must involve efforts to change minds and win popular support (Foran 2016, 164ff.). This is not to say that all environmental justice activists or movements work with a politicized conception of responsibility like the one proposed here; my point is to show how this proposal complements and might contribute to such efforts.

More specifically, this study advances existing environmental justice scholarship by theorizing this politics of responsibility more explicitly in terms of the shared ethico-political judgments—the norms, conventions, and expectations—that inform whom we collectively hold responsible for injustice and whom we do not. My argument suggests that any account of injustice, however compelling, requires an effective discursive politics aimed at reshaping prevailing social practices of responsibility. This argument both amplifies the importance of movements and organizing and clarifies the need for better understandings of how power and justification figure into that politics.

Power

Kayaktivists are working to change a shared narrative that absolves carbon corporations from blame and places responsibility for climate change on individuals. Their strategy conceptualizes shared ethico-political norms and

practices of responsibility as malleable and contestable. The corporations they target share this understanding, working and spending hard to neutralize evolving norms that might threaten their profits (Green 2018).[22] These struggles direct our analytic attention to how norms and practices of responsibility are produced, maintained, and contested—questions that the constructive ontology underlying the politicized conception of responsibility brings to light—and indicate the need for a better understanding of power, particularly structural and productive power (Barnett and Duvall 2005), as a constitutive element of social practices of responsibility.

Power in fact gets very little attention in discussions of responsibility—for climate change or anything else.[23] One important reason for this neglect relates to questions of justification, to which I return in the following section. Another reason is that liberal theorists of responsibility typically conceptualize power quite narrowly in interactional terms, so that when there is no direct causal production of harmful outcomes—the definition of structural injustice for many liberal theorists—they regard power as irrelevant (see Goodhart 2018, chap. 7). As a result, forms of constitutive power that uphold structural injustice receive inadequate attention (Sardo 2020, 12–13). The inattention to power is particularly striking in the work of theorists like Young and Dryzek (see also Dryzek 2006; Dryzek and Pickering 2018), whose focus on communicative action and persuasion invites the theorization of constitutive power. Yet they neglect the role of power because they do not treat *the context of persuasion* as a politicized one. For example, after observing that some climate injustice has clear perpetrators (and citing carbon corporations as an example), Dryzek and Pickering (2018, 74–77) nonetheless warn that assigning responsibility can be counterproductive, potentially getting in the way of global cooperative action, which they view as the only way forward given that climate change involves problems of the "global commons." They see blame as potentially effective "bonding rhetoric" that might motivate like-minded states and activists but prefer "bridging rhetoric" that can unite different actors with different values and worldviews (77–78; cf. Pickering and Barry 2012). Although Young never wrote about climate injustice, her approach to sweatshop owners and managers is quite similar (see Goodhart 2018, 215ff.).

This approach might be defended as pragmatic, at least with respect to UNFCCC negotiations, which require consensus and voluntary compliance to achieve meaningful action. Yet I have two serious concerns about taking it as a general lesson about the politics of responsibility for climate change. First, this apolitical approach requires an ingenuous understanding of the aims, intentions, and strategies of carbon corporations. As already discussed—and as Dryzek and Pickering themselves note—those corporations have lied and deceived the public and policy makers about the science of climate change and lobbied hard to prevent effective action that might affect their operations. Their behavior consistently reveals their understanding that their business model causes dangerous planetary heating, that their continued profitability thus entails catastrophic climate transformation, and that their preference is for continued profitability. Second, the assumption that bridging rhetoric is a more effective motivator than bonding rhetoric assumes that the goal is cooperation among everyone. If the goal, however, is mobilization for the effective mitigation of climate change, "bonding" rhetoric may well be, as discussed earlier, both necessary and highly effective.

There is some evidence that anti-fossil fuel campaigns can be galvanizing and successful. In his brief discussion of fossil fuel divestment movements (FFDMs), Sardo (2020, 17) attributes their success to their ability to "foreground systemic change while strategically invoking a more traditional liability discourse, creating narratives of existential and moral conflict between humanity and the fossil fuel industry" as part of a political project that treats conflict as intrinsic. Such activism can have potent, material impacts on public attitudes, he contends, mobilizing both discursive and productive power by "reframing and transforming the terms and nature of the climate-energy debate" (18, citing Healy and Barry; cf. Dryzek and Pickering 2018, 54). Similarly, Fergus Green (2018) offers an incisive reading of the politics of responsibility for climate change in his study of anti-fossil fuel norms. He analyzes how and why these norms enable advocates to overcome power asymmetries that disadvantage them with respect to corporations by playing to the activists' comparative advantages: discursive power and legitimacy claims. Because activists are increasingly successful in challenging corporate power in normative and discursive registers by advancing anti-fossil fuel norms, corporations respond both by offering their own (often risible) moralized accounts of their behavior and by relying on more traditional forms of coercive power. These responses can further undermine the corporations' legitimacy and reinforce activist narratives, showing how productive power can challenge and potentially counteract structural and coercive power (Green 2018, 108–9).

Power also shapes subjects and social practices more broadly. In connection with the politics of responsibility, it can be both a resource or capacity for making change, as Schiff (2018) argues, and an obstacle to change in the form of subjectivities and ideologies that stand in its way (Butko 2006). There is much more to be learned about this question, as well as about how the politics of responsibility looks from the other side—including attention to the role of ideology in sustaining extant norms and practices of responsibility. As Sardo (2020, 13) argues, "Practices of political responsibility… must involve accounting for those broader forms of constitutive power" that uphold

structural injustice." With respect to climate change, we can think at the macro level about how power shapes narratives of doubt and discourses of individualized responsibility (bike to work! turn down your thermostat!) or at a more micro level about how carbon-intensive objects and practices acquire meaning and shape subjectivity in a shared discursive context (Bulkeley, Paterson, and Stripple 2016b; Paterson and P.-Laberge 2018). Theorists also need to engage more with a question that has been sorely neglected in discussions of responsibility for structural injustice: how specific agents might bear responsibility *for* structures and social practices. That is, instead of assuming that structural complexity erases or overwhelms causal responsibility, we might think more expansively about how various agents *cause* structures to exist and persist.

I cannot take up that work here. The key points for now are that different modalities of power, operating at various levels and through myriad channels, bear on our social practices of responsibility and that changing them requires disruption, the conscious contestation of the norms, subjectivities, and practices that together reproduce our carbon-intensive ways of living and being. Such disruption is fundamentally political (Bulkeley, Paterson, and Stripple 2016a, 193), something that kayaktivists and other climate activists clearly apprehend (Richardson 2020). This insight has important conceptual and practical implications: theorists need better understandings of how activists (and their opponents) wield discursive power in these struggles, and activists need better understandings of which strategies and tactics are effective in what circumstances (see Schiff 2018). Empirical research on the politics of responsibility, informed by the insights of activists and situated within a careful analysis of power, offers a promising way forward in this regard.

Justification

The foregoing discussion suggests that the "problem" of responsibility for climate change cannot be adequately conceived as a puzzle about agency and complexity or about the grounds of an imagined consensus that will enable global cooperation: it is better understood in terms of a political struggle over who will be held responsible. Familiar philosophical approaches to responsibility offer few tools for making sense of this politics; in fact, politics barely registers in those approaches, which interpret responsibility as a reflection or implication of moral and empirical facts. Such an interpretation makes it difficult to comprehend how politics might be relevant to determinations of responsibility; as a result, the politics of responsibility gets obscured or overlooked. This is a significant shortcoming: even if one would reject the politicized account proposed here, politics would remain relevant for our thinking about responsibility. Moral principles

(of responsibility, or anything else) are not self-evident, certainly not in a pluralistic world; nor are they self-executing. Even "correct" moral principles must be taken up and acted on to be effective, matters that theorists and philosophers often treat, if at all, as secondary. On the politicized account, it makes sense to see justification more as a political process than as a form of moral reasoning; it is therefore crucially important to think about how social practices of responsibility take hold, how they operate, and how they might change and be changed.

The politicized account makes an even more radical suggestion, however: that power plays a key role in that political process of justification. It is a constitutive element in social practices of responsibility. Some readers have alleged that this position amounts to the view that in matters of responsibility, *might makes right.* I categorically reject the idea that what is right is somehow equivalent with or determined by which side wins. The politicized conception of responsibility proposed here makes a very different claim: that ethico-political ("moral") questions are part of a complex web of social practice—including debate, habit, reflection, and contestation—that determines who is actually held responsible for what. Thus, responsibility is not simply (!) a question of getting the answer normatively right; it is also irreducibly a question of struggle. The politicized conception of responsibility foregrounds this struggle, focusing our analytic attention on the discursive terrain of contestation where the conflict plays out. As the case of kayaktivism clearly illustrates, it is a conflict variously shaped by coercive, institutional, structural, and productive power. Put simply, it is one thing to hold that might makes right and quite another to hold that power conditions social practices. My position is that responsibility is a social practice. If we accept that claim, then—whether we like it or not—we need a politicized interpretation of responsibility to help us understand how that practice works.

To be clear, I am not claiming that the kayaktivists are "right" nor that activists do or should "get to decide" who is responsible for climate change (or anything else). I am claiming instead that kayaktivism shows that activists understand themselves to be engaged in social struggles to determine who will be held responsible and that their praxis provides valuable and much-needed insight into the politics of responsibility. Similarly, I am not claiming that ethico-political principles are irrelevant to the evaluation of social practices of responsibility but rather that those principles are one part of a more complex politics and that paying attention to that politics helps us theorize the gap between what we might regard as good or correct principles and existing social practices of responsibility that we might find wanting. One implication of this view is certainly that "bad" or "wrong" principles might be successfully advanced by powerful actors to further their own interests; indeed, that is precisely what the kayaktivists

maintain is happening right now with respect to extant practices of social responsibility that let carbon corporations off the hook for climate change. This implication is certainly ethically and politically worrisome—which is precisely why we need to theorize the politics of responsibility more comprehensively.

Conclusion: Taking and Making Responsibility for Climate Change

Taking responsibility can mean many things: owning up to one's obligations stemming from a relationship or from a harm that one has caused (one takes responsibility for one's actions and commitments) or assuming control over a problem or situation (one takes responsibility for a project). In Young's SCM, it means discharging the moral responsibility that one already has (one joins with connected others to address a problem). For kayaktivists, as for many social justice advocates, taking responsibility means *stepping up* (Ackerly 2018a, 120)—demanding accountability and striving to transform existing social arrangements and practices.[24]

The politicized account of responsibility developed here treats it as a social practice of negotiating and contesting shared ethico-political judgments. On this understanding, taking responsibility or stepping up is a way of *making* responsibility: literally of (re)constructing those social practices and judgments through conscious efforts to persuade others, challenge prevailing norms and interpretations, change people's beliefs about how the world works, revise popular expectations of social actors and institutions, and disrupt business as usual. Making responsibility is fundamentally political work—public, shared, deliberative (in the broadest sense), and conflictual—but it receives little mention or attention in the work of political theorists and philosophers writing on responsibility (though see Doan 2020). That is perhaps because conventional thinking about responsibility treats it as something we have, by implication of the moral and empirical facts. The politicized conception of responsibility treats it as an ethico-political practice, one that is contingent, malleable, and therefore subject to revision; responsibility on this view is not something we have but something we create.

I want to conclude by briefly highlighting three implications of my argument. First, the politicized conception demonstrates the need to theorize the politics of responsibility—the ongoing process of negotiation and contestation through which our judgments about responsibility are formed—as such; that is, as a *politics*. This article contributes to that effort through its critique of familiar thinking about blame and complexity, its politicized treatment of justification, and its attention to power. There remains much more work to be done, however, including empirical and interpretive research on the conditions of possibility for the success of efforts to make responsibility around climate change and other issues (see Gunningham 2019 and the contributions to Richardson 2020), as well as on strategy and tactics. Because we have not been accustomed to think of responsibility as politicized, this work will also include historical reinterpretation.

Second, the politicized approach confirms, as Ackerly (2018b, 102) argues, that "we need not resolve the question of moral responsibility for climate change before taking up political responsibility" for it. Indeed, we cannot delay: postponing action until complex normative issues are resolved does an injustice to those already experiencing the ravages of climate change (103). My argument indicates that prioritizing the normative issues also gets the relationship between politics and responsibility backward: on the view I put forward here, we resolve ethico-political questions of responsibility *through* action.[25] If responsibility is made through social activism and mobilization, to postpone action is to endorse the status quo.

Finally, the politicized approach makes an important—if somewhat oblique—contribution to the debate on responsibility for climate change. If the view proposed here is correct, responsibility is not a formula or set of principles for determining who is responsible, why, and in what way; rather, it is the upshot of processes of negotiation and struggle in which ethico-political considerations play a crucial but not decisive role. Understood this way, a political theory of responsibility will not generate a substantive account of responsibility but will rather seek to illuminate the dynamics through which practices of responsibility are formed and contested. So, my approach does not and cannot show that the kayaktivists are substantively right—though it does suggest that they are thinking about responsibility and the politics of responsibility in the right way, conceptually and politically. Moreover, while nothing about this approach is specific to climate change, it is nonetheless directly relevant. After all, my argument shows that if the Carbon Majors and their allies are not responsible for climate change it's because we don't hold them responsible. But as kayaktivists insist, we might.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 Journalist David Wallace-Wells (2017) explains what that catastrophe might look like: if we continue on anything like our present trajectory, surging seas, killer

heatwaves, intensification of extreme weather, declining crop yields, unbreathable air, toxic ocean acidification, and mass extinctions could be realities by century's end.

2 As a reviewer has noted, the *just emissions* or *climate ethics* approach is also sometimes confusingly called "climate justice," blurring an important distinction between its moral-philosophical approach and distributive justice paradigm and an *environmental justice* literature that is praxis oriented and adopts a social movements framework (Schlosberg and Collins 2014). I use *just emissions* and *environmental justice* to keep this distinction clear.

3 My sympathies are firmly with the environmental justice approach. Treating GHG emissions in isolation, as just emissions theorists do, ignores the complex structures and relations of power that engender environmental injustices of all kinds. Excluding historical and contemporary structures of injustice may make just emissions self-defeating: much of the actual debate among states about who should bear the costs of climate change mitigation, adaptation, and compensation is shaped by legacies of colonialism and by ongoing relations of political and economic domination (Parks and Roberts 2010; Roberts and Parks 2006).

4 My extended discussion of kayaktivism is meant to help answer potential objections regarding cherry-picking the evidence. I draw extensively on interviews with activists who are differently socially positioned and involved in different protests, through different organizations in different parts of the world, to show deep similarities in their thinking about the politics of responsibility. One reviewer worries that a there is a different kind of cherry-picking at work in my selection of an example that happens to illustrate my conceptual argument, but I chose this case for that very reason: to help with theory-building.

5 On the emergent "grounded normative theory" movement see Ackerly et al. (2021); Green and Brandstedt (2021); Hoover (2020).

6 May describes shared responsibility as each individual's part of the responsibility for harms caused by the actions of a collective. For discussion of what sorts of "collectives" these might be and of their potential responsibility, see Cripps (2011), Doan (2020), French (2020), Fyfe (2020), Isaacs (2014; 2017), Rovane (2014), and Shockley (2020).

7 Carol Gould (2009, 204) identifies two distinct conceptions of responsibility in Young's account: one based in connection (which Gould describes as backward-looking) and one grounded in the sense that we should do something for others (which Gould calls forward-looking).

8 So, I agree with Hayward that a factual reading of the SCM fails to capture Young's full view: she certainly hoped to "induce people to act in ways they ought to act, but otherwise might not" (Hayward 2017, 399); it is Young's treatment of this as the discharge of responsibility that concerns me.

9 This and the following paragraphs summarize, revise, and expand arguments introduced in Goodhart (2017).

10 One reviewer has pressed me on whether kayaktivism is really different or distinct from other forms of social mobilization. The answer is that, on the dimension of interest to me here—the politicized conception of responsibility that informs kayaktivist strategy and tactics—I cannot say. To answer the question whether other activists share this understanding and orientation would require a very different research design. An answer is not necessary for my argument here, however, because my claim is not that kayaktivism is singular in its politics *but rather that its politics are exemplary* of a politicized conception of responsibility. The case illustrates that this conception is politically plausible: it "grounds" the theory. If other groups turn out to hold similar views—if kayaktivists are not singular in this way—that would *strengthen* my claim (see n. 12).

11 Moyer cited as exemplary the Greensboro, North Carolina, lunch-counter sit-ins, which "told the full story" and dramatized injustice as part of a wider campaign (Taylor 1977, 69–70).

12 To repeat, I am not claiming that kayaktivism is *singular* in this, only that it is *exemplary.* One reviewer suggests that I should make clear that the practice I am theorizing is probably widespread—and that if it is not, I am wasting your time (and mine). Again, I am genuinely unsure about how widespread this view might be (see n. 10), but the reviewer's suggestion betrays a misunderstanding of my project. I am not theorizing social movements or their practices; I am theorizing responsibility—making a case *for* a politicized conception of responsibility. Some activists engaged in the politics of responsibility share and enact this understanding, but its prevalence has no bearing on the conceptual argument, the point of which is to enable theorists and activists to think differently, and I hope better, about that politics.

13 Fyfe (2020, 221–22) also argues that forward-looking accounts are more likely to motivate people to act, especially in cases of ongoing crisis.

14 There are grounds for thinking that it is wrong to knowingly contribute even a smidgen to a cumulative problem like this one (see Kagan 2011).

15 "Agent A is IR for state of affairs S when 1) S is undesirable, 2) A could significantly mitigate S without excessive cost" (Jamieson 2015, 38).

16 McAdam's review is problematic insofar as it is framed around a question about the lack of grassroots climate activism. By narrowing his analysis to groups focused primarily on global warming/emissions reduction, McAdam overlooks the many frontline environmental justice movements that are tackling a range of interconnected injustices (see Smith and Patterson 2019).

17 Jamieson (2014, 81–93) maintains that his *intervention responsibility* model can help theorists focus on what firms can do to reduce emissions, but he stresses that it does so in a forward-looking way that avoids blaming them. Similarly, Young's SCM admits the possibility that firms might share responsibility for structural injustice, but because it moralizes *all* connections, it assumes away culpability and rules out any *distinctive* corporate responsibility (a problem that warps Young's analysis of sweatshops; Goodhart 2018, 215ff.). As Eckersley (2016, 354) points out, Young's model also assumes or implies that responsible (connected) agents share a sense of social connection to and moral concern for others—an idea that Eckersley finds hard to accept in the case of fossil fuel companies.

18 See n. 6.

19 It is noteworthy that of the 85 extant Carbon Majors, 31 are headquartered outside UNFCCC Annex 1 states (those with historically highest emissions), including 10 of the top 20. A focus on corporate responsibility would thus entail a very different accounting of emissions and responsibility than that which informs the country-based (individualist) approach of the UNFCCC and the just emissions literature (Heede 2014, 236).

20 This was the time of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (the "Earth Summit"), which among other achievements established the UNFCCC.

21 See https://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/24/us/global-warming-has-begun-expert-tells-senate.html.

22 See also the foregoing discussion of deception and manufactured doubt.

23 As I have already discussed, both Young and Jamieson (2015) factor power into their determinations of responsibility. Miller (2005) offers a slightly different view, arguing that power is a factor in the assignment of "remedial" responsibility. But remedial responsibility is unrelated in his view to culpable causation (moral responsibility) and is entirely forward-looking, so although power does influence the determination of some remedial part of responsibility, it comes into play *after* blame has been apportioned.

24 The question of what motivates people to step up—to take and make responsibility in this way—is an interesting and important one, but it is not my subject here.

25 For an enlightening discussion of this kind of neo-pragmatic movement praxis; see Woodly (2021).

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