

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Climate hypocrisy and environmental integrity

Valentin Beck 

Institute of Philosophy, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

## Correspondence

Valentin Beck, Institute of Philosophy, Freie Universität Berlin, Thielallee 43, Berlin 14195, Germany.

Email: [valentin.beck@fu-berlin.de](mailto:valentin.beck@fu-berlin.de)

## Funding information

Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung (Feodor Lynen Research Fellowship)

**KEYWORDS:** climate denial, disinformation, greenwashing, hypocrisy, integrity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Climate change poses an existential threat to the world's ecosystems and to human societies. In order to slow and eventually halt global warming, governments, firms, and civil society must enact radical structural change in order to minimize greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel use. Cynicism, pessimism, and defeatism are currently prevalent, however, and threaten to undermine the cooperative spirit needed to achieve a low carbon economy. Climate change denial has played a major role in feeding these destructive attitudes. Since the discovery of the greenhouse effect, the fossil fuel industry and a network of powerful allies have utilized every imaginable tactic to promote business as usual and to foster political inaction. For decades, they have sown doubt and misinformation about global warming, its causes, and its dangerous impact (Oreskes & Conway 2012). In response to widespread acceptance of the proof of anthropogenic warming, these actors have adapted their strategies beyond outright factual denial. One alternative strategy is shifting the public debate to individual morality (Lamb et al., 2020; Mann, 2021), emphasizing how individual lifestyles are inextricably intertwined with the environmentally profligate status quo, and thereby demoralizing the citizens of top emitting nations. The charge of hypocrisy is prominent in such demoralization efforts. It is leveled against climate scientists and activists, pro-environmentalist politicians and their supporters, “eco-celebrities”, or simply “the elites”, who are alleged not to practice what they preach, as they lead energy-intensive lifestyles.

---

[Correction added on 1 June 2023, after first online publication: Reference Schneider et al., 2016 has been updated in this version.]

---

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2023 The Author. *Journal of Social Philosophy* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

If this charge were advanced only by agents who attempt to delay climate action, one could dismiss it by pointing to their own immoral activities. Instead of doing these lobbyists the favor of discussing the charge in earnest, one could change the terms of the conversation and redirect attention to the damaging effects of climate denial, and to feasible and urgently needed institutional decarbonization measures. The discursive constellation is more complicated, however, for two reasons. First, the accusation of lifestyle hypocrisy has long been a recurring theme in the general debate on climate change. It is not only discussed by those who are cynical about the prospects for individual and political climate action (such as “climate cynicism” is not necessarily strategic). It is also considered by many who reflect, in good faith, on questions of individual morality and integrity in relation to climate change—such as how to reconcile our prosperous way of life with the imperative to leave a habitable world for future generations. Second, the accusation often takes another form, namely when governments or politicians are criticized for actions that contradict their proclaimed concern for climate change mitigation. This second variant of the hypocrisy charge can also be leveled with different motivations: by advocates of effective climate action, but also by cynical disinformation campaigners who intend to sow division and doubt about such action. The discursive variability of the climate hypocrisy charge means that a solid understanding of its relevance is needed.

In recent years, empirical studies have begun to shed light on various discursive references to climate hypocrisy (see Gunster et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2016) as well as on the frequently stark discrepancies between green rhetoric and the real world actions of governments (Stevenson, 2021) and of fossil fuel companies (Li et al., 2022). This article complements such approaches with a systematic philosophical analysis, by focusing on the precise conceptual delineation and normative evaluation of climate hypocrisy and adjacent varieties of ecological inconsistency. Such conceptual and normative work is needed, as the meaning and significance of hypocrisy is generally not well-understood. This is partly because even classical references to “hypocrisy” such as those in the bible do not explicitly denote a unified phenomenon, but point to a group of loosely related inconsistencies. Accordingly, everyday accusations of hypocrisy are often framed in vague terms. Their normative relevance is also frequently left unstated. The same is true for climate hypocrisy. A systematic conceptual and normative approach can clarify matters. I present such an account here, arguing that different instances of climate hypocrisy and related ecological inconsistencies are differently problematic depending on how detrimental they are to an agent’s attainment of environmental integrity.

I proceed in four main steps. I first outline two prominent variants of the climate hypocrisy charge: (1) the accusation of “lifestyle hypocrisy”, and (2) criticisms of governments and other political representatives who fail to fulfill their stated climate commitments (see Section 2). Next, I provide a conceptual analysis of climate hypocrisy, which ties it to the core phenomenon of dissimulation of environmental virtue (Section 3). I then introduce a notion of environmental integrity to evaluate how problematic climate hypocrisy is where it actually occurs (Section 4). In the final step, I show how the general notion of integrity allows us to assess the moral significance of different uses of the accusation and to clear the fog of moral disinformation (Section 5).

## 2 | TWO CHARGES OF CLIMATE HYPOCRISY

### 2.1 | Organized climate denial and the charge of lifestyle hypocrisy

The origin of the lifestyle hypocrisy charge can be traced back to early instances of climate denial. Organized climate denial is a “counter-movement” (Brulle, 2013) to the scientific and

political recognition of anthropogenic global warming and its practical implications. It consists of a complex set of interconnected and mutually supportive actors, including: fossil fuel lobbyists and their front groups, other industry representatives, public relations firms, astroturf (fake “grassroots”) groups, pseudo-scientific institutes, contrarian scientists, “conservative” foundations and think tanks, media outlets, and politicians with industry ties (Cho et al., 2011; Brulle, 2013, Schneider et al., 2016, Ch. 3). Over the years, climate deniers have targeted different audiences with a variety of tailored messages to avert political efforts to decarbonize our societies. Their agenda is not reducible to generic, uniform denial of the scientific evidence. Rather, they express a broad range of attitudes, which differ in their theoretical assumptions and in the way the practical case for inaction on climate change is made (Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Lamb et al., 2020; Mann, 2021; Oreskes & Conway, 2012).

On the theoretical level, denialist attitudes vary, first, in terms of their determinacy, ranging from more guarded articulation of “doubt” or “skepticism” to outright rejection of the scientific consensus; and second, in terms of the objects of denial. These include: the existence of climate change; the credibility of climate scientists or activists; the anthropogenic causes of climate change; or its devastating consequences. Theoretical denial can even involve denying that one is engaging in denial: As recently as 2019, Rupert Murdoch falsely stated that “there are no climate change deniers around News Corp” (Readfearn, 2019).

On the practical level, members of the denial network allege that we cannot or should not switch to clean energy sources or reduce greenhouse gas emissions in other sectors, or, alternatively, that this can wait. Such a disposition to dismiss or delay political climate action can be paired with attitudes ranging from the rejection of “alarmism” in favor of flawed “optimistic” prognoses, according to which the effects of climate change will be minor, and perhaps advantageous, to defeatist and “doomist” diagnoses, according to which it is already too late to do anything. Although these professionals now increasingly concede the existence of (anthropogenic) global warming (such as when they suggest that we should focus solely on adaptation measures), they continue denying what can and must be done to decarbonize and to limit the most catastrophic damage. Theoretical denial strategically supports practical denial, because if climate change does not exist or is not man-made, then there is nothing that humanity can or must do about it. But practical denial can also be expressed even when theoretical denial is absent. Purely practical denial and associated advocacy to delay climate action are doubtlessly increasing (Lamb et al., 2020; Mann, 2021; Supran & Oreskes, 2021).

The dissemination of the lifestyle hypocrisy charge is symptomatic of this shift. Its targets are typically advocates of decarbonization, who are accused of failing to live up to the commitments entailed by their advocacy. It is suggested that these alleged “hypocrites” are living by a double standard, exempting themselves from the rules they would impose on others. Additionally or alternatively, it is said that the targets of this accusation cannot credibly call for social change in response to global warming, since their own lifestyles make them complicit in the use of fossil fuels. The lifestyle hypocrisy charge can combine elements of theoretical and practical climate denial, as in the following example: “Climate activist X does not lead a sustainable lifestyle. What a hypocrite! Climate change must not be that bad (if it exists at all!)” In order to qualify as an instance of purely practical denial, the hypocrisy charge could be framed along the following lines: “Climate activists don’t even take all the personal steps they claim will fight climate change. This is hypocritical and shows they don’t really believe these actions will help.”

The lifestyle hypocrisy charge is not new (see Aiken, 2009; Schneider et al., 2016, Ch. 5). Its use goes back at least as far as 1993, when right wing radio host Rush Limbaugh accused then US vice president Al Gore of hypocrisy about his own consumption habits. The accusation has since become a standard tactic. In one instance, the Canadian Conservative Party’s candidate

accused his opponent, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, of hypocrisy for his allegedly excessive use of campaign planes. The charge is also frequently directed at broader groups such as “cosmopolitan” or “globalist” “elites”, and need not even involve a claim that the target consumes more fossil fuels than a “usual” or “fair” amount. Divestment activist Bill McKibben reports being stalked by hired photographers who published images of him with plastic bags purchased on a spontaneous shopping trip. The images were intended to yield a “gotcha” that would undermine his environmentalist credentials (McKibben, 2016; Mann, 2021, Ch. 4). In a similar spirit, some media commentators have denigrated participants of the Fridays for Future student movement for using fossil-fuel powered transportation.

## 2.2 | Accusations of political climate hypocrisy

The climate hypocrisy charge takes a different form when addressed to governments and political representatives, for political actions inconsistent with their publicly stated commitments on climate policy. Both variants of the accusation meet in the persons of Trudeau and McKibben. As mentioned, McKibben has been a target of the lifestyle hypocrisy charge, next to Gore, Trudeau and countless others. But McKibben has also accused Trudeau and the prime minister of Australia at the time, Malcolm Turnbull, of hypocritically contradicting their rhetorical commitment to climate action with their fossil fuel friendly export policies (McKibben, 2017). Along similar lines, Greta Thunberg and other student activists regularly accuse international political leaders of hypocrisy for setting distant and ineffective net zero emission targets while failing to take immediate steps to tackle the climate crisis (see e.g., Carrington, 2020).

Having outlined two prominent forms of the climate hypocrisy charge, I will now turn to its assessment, by analyzing the conceptual conditions for climate hypocrisy (see Section 3), before evaluating the phenomenon (see Section 4) and the different forms of the charge (see Section 5) on normative grounds.

## 3 | THE CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS OF CLIMATE HYPOCRISY

The term “hypocrisy” is often vaguely applied to those who, in biblical terms, “say one thing and do something else” (Matthew 23,2). But verifying or refuting a hypocrisy charge requires a more precise interpretation which allows us to distinguish hypocrisy from other adjacent behavioral inconsistencies, such as weakness of will or caprice. Precisely delineating hypocrisy turns out to be difficult, however. The bible—the text that has most influenced our conception of hypocrisy—uses “hypocrisy” in several ways. In the Old Testament (and the Qu’ran), the term “hypocrite” is used as a vague critique for people who are “corrupt in character” or “impious”—newer translations use alternative descriptors such as “godless,” “nefarious,” or “despisers of God”. In the New Testament, a more specific understanding of “hypocrite” emerges. It refers to those who (i) portray their religiosity or morality insincerely, (ii) are guilty of inconsistencies in blame and advice, or (iii) are guilty of complacency. Is it possible, however, to delineate an overarching phenomenon under which these different behavioral patterns can be subsumed?

The philosophical debate is inconclusive on this subject.<sup>1</sup> The seminal essay “Let us not be hypocritical” by Judith Shklar (1984, Ch. 2) proceeds by interpreting philosophical and literary classics. Shklar highlights the descriptive and evaluative complexity of the phenomenon without attempting to provide a single definition. Christine McKinnon (1991) narrowly frames

hypocrisy as manipulative deception about moral qualities for reputational gain. She thereby reduces hypocrisy to only one of its variants and leaves the problem of conceptual unity unaddressed. Crisp & Cowton (1994: 346–7) do address the problem, but do not succeed in showing that what they identify as hypocrisy's four main forms (“pretence”, “blame”, “inconsistency”, and “complacency”) are all instantiations of a singular, more general phenomenon. They propose that each form is a failure to take morality seriously (*ibid.*, 347), which does not rule out clearly non-hypocritical behavior such as blatant amorality. Szabados and Soifer (2004) have presented the most comprehensive study of hypocrisy to date, in which they look at this phenomenon from multiple angles and discuss numerous examples. However, they, too, “offer no comprehensive theory, either conceptual or ethical” (*ibid.*, 335). Instead of identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions, they content themselves with “uncover[ing] some recurring elements of hypocrisy, such as the need for an audience, an element of deception (whether of oneself or of others), and an element of self-interest (typically a concern for a good reputation in terms of prevailing norms [...])” (*ibid.*, 339).

In contrast to approaches that describe family resemblances between loosely connected behaviors, I propose a unified interpretation of hypocrisy as dissimulation of virtue. This understanding is meant to capture what is central in classical and contemporary understandings without being fully determined by them. The narrowing of conceptual scope comes with a much needed gain in conceptual clarity. Furthermore, even behaviors that fall outside the spectrum of variations of hypocrisy can nevertheless be assessed using the same evaluative standard, which will show that they are often no better (see Section 4). To begin, let me first outline the most important general conceptual features of hypocrisy as dissimulation of virtue, before setting out the conditions for climate hypocrisy specifically.

A helpful general definition is available from the Oxford English Dictionary Online, whereupon “hypocrisy” consists of “assuming of a false appearance of virtue or goodness, with dissimulation of real character or inclinations”. This definition captures much of what is essential, and is therefore rightly used as a starting point in several philosophical accounts (e.g., Shklar, 1984: 47; Wallace, 2010: 308).<sup>2</sup> However, to more precisely delineate hypocrisy requires expanding from this definition. I will do so by specifying six aspects that together help us categorize different variations.

First, hypocrisy emanates from an agent-relative inconsistency; the behavior in question must be inconsistent with the very norms that the agent has committed to in some or other communication. This feature explains why reproaches of hypocrisy are so easy to level: accusers need not themselves commit to the hypocritically expressed norm in order for their critique to be legitimate (Shklar, 1984: 48; Wallace, 2010: 307).

Second, agents can dissimulate different personal qualities ranging from religious virtues (such as piety) to broadly ethical and narrowly moral qualities (Crisp & Cowton, 1994: 344).<sup>3</sup> Agents can also dissimulate a moral motivation for a morally correct action which they perform out of self-interest. In addition, the motives for which people can be hypocritical are also very broad, and may include self-promotion and reputational gain, shame, servility, but also respect for fellow human beings and for the recognition of moral norms.<sup>4</sup>

Third, virtue dissimulation requires that the agent intentionally portrays herself as compliant with the norm(s) in question. Whether this criterion is met may not always be evident, since communicative expression is notoriously opaque and subject to misinterpretation. Take the example of a woman, Carlova, who regularly uses a petrol car over more sustainable alternatives. She posts a new picture on her social media profile that shows her on a bicycle. It would be uncharitable to take the post as an instance of hypocrisy, if Carlova's intention were simply

to update her profile with a picture of her liking, as she engages in no dissimulation. She would have acted hypocritically, according to this criterion, only if she had shared the picture with the intention to portray herself as an environmentally conscientious, regular cyclist.

Fourth, next to the standard case of conscious dissimulation of personal qualities, which is often performed with the intention to deceive others, agents can be unconsciously hypocritical by deceiving themselves about their character (Statman, 1997; Szabados & Soifer, 2004, Ch. 13). Hypocrisy can arise from a range of cognitive dispositions of untruthfulness, including intentional false self-portrayal, “bullshitting” in the sense of indifference to the truth (Frankfurt, 1986), and self-deceived false self-portrayal. To specify our example accordingly, assume that Carlova had shared the picture with the intention to convey personal environmental frugality, while unconsciously suppressing awareness of her unsustainable lifestyle.

Fifth, not only individuals, but also group agents—such as companies, governments, clubs or NGOs—can hypocritically dissimulate agential qualities, above and beyond any hypocrisy by their members. Such group agency is genuinely collective (as opposed to being a mere aggregate of individual actions), when a group possesses collective decision-making structures such that its collective attitudes and actions are not reducible to the attitudes and actions of individual members (List & Pettit, 2011).

Sixth, hypocrisy can be constituted via different modes of communication. These comprise both language-based and non-verbal forms of symbolic expression (as in the case of Carlova's post), and different kinds of speech-acts, including assertion and moral address. Hypocritical assertion occurs when an agent dissimulates personal qualities either through explicit statements or by intentional conversational implicature. Alternatively, agents can dissimulate personal qualities via moral address, including blame, advice, or praise. It is controversial whether agents categorically lack the “standing” to blame or criticize others for actions that they themselves perform(ed) (Wallace, 2010; Dover, 2019 for a more permissive view), or to give advice to others that they do not follow. What matters for the purposes of this article is that agents can engage in hypocritical and objectionable moral address. This includes praise, namely when an agent dissimulates moral or ethical qualities by praising someone else—for example when an organization portrays itself in a positive light by awarding a prize to someone for an achievement that stands in stark contrast to its own conduct.

Not every inconsistency in moral address constitutes hypocrisy, however. Agents can avoid dissimulating moral or ethical qualities by explicitly admitting that they are not (yet) living in compliance with the norms that underpin their address. The classic example is doctors who give medical advice (e.g., to give up smoking), but openly admit to not following the advice themselves, from a weakness of will. One can criticize them for not following their own medical advice, or encourage them to overcome their addiction. But to criticize them for giving the advice is misguided (Wallace, 2010: 329, fn. 37). We would not want to disincentivize objectively warranted advice just because the advisor does not follow it. Moral address that is self-revealing in such a way appears unobjectionable. Moreover, the description of hypocrisy seems misplaced whenever an honest admission of non-compliance rules out a false portrayal of the corresponding agential qualities (the third condition).<sup>5</sup>

Let us now focus on the conditions under which climate hypocrisy obtains, starting with the variant of lifestyle hypocrisy. Are advocates of climate action with high consumption lifestyles necessarily hypocritical, as is sometimes suggested? The short answer is: No. Whether an agent acts hypocritically depends not just on the norms they promote and comply with, but also on what claims or implications they make about themselves. As long as one does not overstate one's own efforts to live sustainably within the existing profligate system, it is not hypocritical

to pressure governments to decarbonize, although this does not settle the question of whether and to what extent undisguised individual profligacy is morally acceptable (see Section 4). Of course, individuals can be hypocritical about their lifestyles, when they falsely assert or intentionally imply that they have a modest or reduced carbon footprint. Alternatively, individuals can be hypocritical in their moral address (for example in blame, advice or praise given to others with respect to personal carbon impact) when such address accompanies a false self-portrayal of the related moral qualities. Individuals can even be hypocritical in assertions or moral address regarding their climate related donations or advocacy efforts. Hypocrisy in all these areas is avoidable, however. All one needs to do is clearly differentiate between personal and governmental responsibilities for emission reduction, adaptation and compensation, and to refrain from dissimulating personal qualities.

One might think that individually profligate advocates of climate action are bound to be hypocritical in their criticisms of governments and their representatives, or of corporations who are aggravating the problem of climate change. Not so. It can be argued that hypocritical blame involves the violation of an equality requirement, insofar as blamers exempt themselves from the principles to which they hold others accountable (Wallace, 2010). But advocates of political climate action do not violate this requirement in their criticisms of governments and firms. This is because they do not blame these group agents and representatives for falling short of their personal responsibilities, but for failing to comply with normative standards specific to the sphere of political or corporate agency—such as when a government is blamed for catering to special interests, or when a fossil fuel company is blamed for financing climate denial. These agents not only have vastly greater political power than individuals, they are indispensable when it comes to structural decarbonization. Although individual responsibility arguably matters, too (see Section 4), it is not hypocritical, but warranted and even required for citizens to focus their criticism on governments and companies who fail to do their fair share, or worse, who actively undermine decarbonization efforts.<sup>6</sup>

This leads to the conceptual assessment of political climate hypocrisy (see Section 2.2). Governments and political representatives can be hypocritical analogously to individual citizens, when they make false or intentionally misleading assertions related to emission reduction; for example when they downplay their country's causal contribution to the climate crisis or exaggerate the positive environmental effect of their policies. Governmental climate hypocrisy can also occur in false or intentionally misleading assertions about adaptation and victim compensation measures. Likewise, governments can engage in moral address hypocrisy, such as when they portray moral or ethical qualities in climate-related blame or advice addressed to other governments, while concealing how they exempt themselves from the relevant normative standards. Greta Thunberg indirectly pointed to the additional possibility of hypocritical praise, when she told members of US congress: “Please save your praise, we don't want it. Don't invite us here to tell us how inspiring we are without doing anything about it.”<sup>7</sup> Praise by political representatives can be hypocritical, namely when their underlying intention is to present themselves in a morally or ethically positive light that does not match their behavior. The agent-relativity of this phenomenon is such that, as with lifestyle hypocrisy, political representatives can avoid being hypocritical by not dissimulating personal qualities.<sup>8</sup>

This section's conceptual analysis provides the tools for detecting inaccuracies in charges of climate hypocrisy, insofar as the behavior and attitudes of the accused agents do not meet the relevant conditions. Such inaccuracies may arise often, given the frequency and imprecision of hypocrisy charges and their strategic use by fossil fuel lobbyists. In particular, generalized accusations of hypocrisy leveled at broad or stylized groups (such as “climate activists”, “tree

huggers” or “elitists”) do not account for the broad range of individual variation in compliance with and communicative reference to the relevant behavioral norms. Likewise, generalized accusations of political hypocrisy cannot account for the manifold ways in which governments and political representatives communicate their efforts related to climate action. Those who pronounce the relevant normative commitments run a higher risk of inconsistency than those who refrain from doing so. However, even agents who publicly affirm the relevant norms can avoid hypocrisy if they remain honest in assertions about their achievements and refrain from engaging in hypocritical moral address.

Although lifestyle and political climate hypocrisy share conceptual characteristics, their normative underpinnings are very different, due to the primacy of political climate action. I have so far considered the conceptual conditions for climate hypocrisy, discussed how the corresponding charges can be incorrect, and shown how agents can avoid being hypocritical. The charge of climate hypocrisy is not always refutable on factual grounds, however. So, exactly how problematic is climate hypocrisy, where it actually obtains?

#### **4 | EVALUATING CLIMATE HYPOCRISY WITH A VIEW TO ENVIRONMENTAL INTEGRITY**

The climate hypocrisy charge can be advanced strategically or earnestly (see Section 1). The lifestyle hypocrisy charge is frequently pressed by climate deniers, but it can also be leveled by an environmentalist who finds it relevant, perhaps even despite being aware of the disinformation and demoralization strategies in which it is often embedded. Political climate hypocrisy, too, can be criticized by opponents and proponents of political decarbonization, because it need not be accompanied by the demand that political leaders leave fossil fuels in the ground. The accusation could be used by a lobbyist who is bothered not by a government’s feeble record on decarbonization, but by its commitment to allegedly unachievable or unnecessary goals. And while corporate greenwashing is typically denounced by environmentalists, it can also be criticized by those who object only to the green rhetoric, not to the inaction. This discursive and evaluative diversity can lead to mistaken views about how problematic climate hypocrisy really is, and what (if anything) should be done to avoid it.

My proposal is that we judge climate hypocrisy according to the degree to which it hinders the attainment of environmental integrity. In order to carve out this notion, it will be helpful to first assess the pitfalls of two methods by which environmental underachievers can attain the agent-relative consistency needed for avoiding climate hypocrisy. First, they could downgrade or eliminate their ambitions regarding their climate responsibilities (assuming they have any in the first place). Second, they could maintain high ambitions, but sincerely communicate the extent to which they fail to live up to them.

When it comes to the first strategy, personal and political responsibility are disanalogous. Global warming poses a particularly grave collective action problem which can only be effectively tackled in the political sphere, by way of government regulation and international cooperation (Gardiner, 2011, Ch. 1 and 4). In order to avoid or limit catastrophic harms, governments must cut emissions through deep structural changes to the economic modes of production and consumption, including energy generation and consumption, agriculture and forestation, transportation and construction, taxation, and trade, etc. Individuals could therefore feel justified in blaming the system for their environmental profligacy. It is true that even elected government representatives can partially blame systemic deficits for their climate inaction, since they are

constrained by election cycles and the present-oriented reporting of media outlets. They can further deflect responsibility by pointing to the inaction of their peers. However, they cannot plausibly deny that governments bear a primary responsibility to implement encompassing climate policies via international cooperation. Slowing and eventually stopping global warming necessitates collective action by way of nationally and internationally coordinated government action, which must include measures such as: effective carbon pricing, eliminating fossil fuel subsidies, incentivizing renewable energy use, and the comprehensive decarbonization of all energy sectors and of the electric power grid (Mann, 2021, Ch. 5 and 6). Different states have different climate responsibilities, stemming from their historical contributions to the climate crisis and their present capacities to solve it (Caney, 2018). But given that political climate action is indispensable for avoiding climate catastrophe, it is unacceptable for governments to avoid hypocrisy simply by repudiating responsibility for emission reduction, adaptation, and victim compensation, such that their pronouncements on these issues are consistent with their inaction. This is especially true for industrialized nations, who owe much of their wealth to the development and use of fossil-fuel technologies and who have more direct avenues for shaping the contours of a decarbonized world, compared to small developing nations with a minimal political clout.

The case of individual climate responsibility is more complicated. Even personally profligate advocates of structural decarbonization can avoid being hypocritical by categorically separating political from personal responsibility, and by downplaying the latter's importance. Personal responsibility could thus be completely rejected along the following lines: (1) It would be hypocritical to pretend that personal fossil fuel frugality matters, while maintaining profligate consumption habits. (2) We do not want to be hypocrites. (3) Therefore, let us stop pretending that personal fossil fuel frugality matters.

The problem is that on moral grounds, personal climate responsibility cannot be entirely dismissed (Fragnière, 2016; Hourdequin, 2010). Although pressuring governments to minimize the damage from climate change is the most important task for citizens, climate responsibility is not entirely reducible to the political sphere. Instead, political and personal responsibility are complementary and interdependent. The required decarbonization measures concern radical changes in all economic sectors, sustained by a major shift towards renewable energy sources that includes leaving much of the remaining fossil fuels in the ground. Although such measures must be guided and implemented via government regulation and international cooperation, they would have a pervasive impact on personal behavior. The necessary structural changes can arguably also be partly stimulated by altered consumer behavior from the bottom up, particularly in contexts where political reforms are blocked by special interest groups. Avoiding climate hypocrisy via eliminating environmentalist ambitions is therefore a morally unacceptable strategy for political representatives and for private citizens. In order to be environmentally responsible agents, both must resist the temptation to inaction.

In addition to being morally objectionable, leveling down one's standards (whether consciously or subconsciously) may not even yield the intended outcome of avoiding hypocrisy, depending on how we understand complacency—a vice that often overlaps with hypocrisy, but is separable from it. Jason Kawall helpfully analyses complacency as an “epistemically culpable overestimate of one's efforts and achievements, and a resultant excessive self-satisfaction”, which “produce a lack of desire or felt need to improve or maintain one's efforts with respect to a project” (Kawall 2004: 353). On this definition, agents can be merely complacent without also being hypocritical, if they culpably overestimate their own efforts and achievements, but do so by “minding their own business” and by refraining from overselling their personal qualities or accomplishments in communication with others. Accordingly, individuals and collectives can

avoid climate hypocrisy at the price of complacency, if they silently overestimate their environmental achievements. The likelihood of this scenario can be left open. What this comparison of proximate vices confirms, however, is that some alternatives to hypocrisy—unconcealed amorality, ruefully shed ambitions, or pure complacency—are morally unacceptable.

I can now evaluate the second method of avoiding climate hypocrisy, namely affirming atmospheric responsibility while remaining sincere and adequately self-reflective about the extent of one's failings. As with a doctor who advises patients to reduce sugar, but admits being addicted to sweets, agents can confess to not living up to moral norms whose validity they recognize. Intuitively, this strategy seems less problematic than the first. We would not want to be treated by someone who withholds objectively warranted medical advice merely in order to remain consistent with their own unhealthy lifestyle. Analogously, individual and collective agents seem to do better in moral terms when they keep track of the real extent of their climate responsibility while remaining honest about their record, than if they stop affirming the relevant norms merely for reasons of internal consistency.<sup>9</sup>

A notion of environmental integrity is not only capable of backing these intuitions, but also offers guidance for the evaluation of climate hypocrisy more generally. Environmental integrity is to be understood as a subjective character trait and virtue in a broad sense (distinct from ecological integrity as intactness of natural objects or ecosystems), namely as a stable disposition for minimizing environmental harm where this is reasonably possible and not in conflict with other normative requirements. This disposition involves epistemic as well pragmatic personal qualities, which are justifiable via different moral theories.<sup>10</sup> On the epistemic level, environmental integrity requires agents to assess their environmental responsibilities conscientiously and to represent their views truthfully to others and themselves. They should not deceive themselves or others about how their behavior is causally related to reasonably avoidable environmental harm. This epistemic requirement applies to individuals and group agents alike, and includes the human contribution to climate change as only one object of environmental concern, albeit a major one. On the pragmatic level, environmental integrity requires agents to be genuinely committed to acting on their environmental responsibilities, which includes acting jointly with others to overcome structural and political hurdles to environmentally responsible agency.

Understood in this way, environmental integrity is a moral virtue. This contrasts with some other interpretations of integrity, such as self-integration as internal consistency of lower- and higher-order volitions (as in Harry Frankfurt's work), or dedication to projects that are constitutive of the agent's identity and may be in tension with moral agency (as in Bernard Williams's writings) (for discussion, see Calhoun, 1995: 236–246). Environmental integrity morally requires agents to be epistemically and pragmatically committed to minimizing environmental harm, and to work with others towards achieving the social and economic background conditions for environmentally responsible agency. While this notion thus places moral demands on agents, it can still accommodate reasonable disagreement about the substance of environmentally responsible agency. In this respect, attributions of environmental integrity broadly align with attributions of integrity generally, as these do not ordinarily presuppose full moral agreement between those who attribute and those who possess such integrity, although a person of integrity must subscribe to a “defensible picture of what is right” (Cox et al., 2003: 9; see also Calhoun, 1995).

I am highlighting these connecting lines between the area-specific notion of environmental integrity and integrity more generally without presupposing a comprehensive conception of the latter. It must suffice here to show how the former broadly mirrors epistemic and pragmatic

components of the general notion of integrity as conceived in ordinary discourse and by a number of contemporary accounts.<sup>11</sup> On the epistemic level, integrity in general can be taken to require not just a range of dispositions of outward sincerity, including truthfulness and avoidance of deception,<sup>12</sup> but also a sufficient degree of self-knowledge (Taylor, 1985, Ch. 5; Cox et al., 2003) and reflexivity with regards to the formation and adaptation of one's values, convictions and commitments over time (*ibid.*). The latter should arguably include a disposition to reflect on the justifiability of convictions and commitments, both in inner dialogue and in reasoned deliberation with others (Calhoun, 1995; Scherkoske, 2013). Character traits such as self-deception, complacency, fanaticism, dogmatism, or arrogance therefore undermine the integrity of those that possess them. On the pragmatic level, integrity generally involves a disposition to act on the values and commitments which one responsibly forms and defends in deliberation with others (Taylor, 1985, Ch. 5; Calhoun, 1995; Cox et al., 2003; Scherkoske, 2013). Both of these components of integrity are replicated in other area-specific notions such as professional or intellectual integrity.

Identifying the epistemic and pragmatic components of environmental integrity enables us to justify why avoiding hypocrisy via honest admission of shortcomings is better than avoiding hypocrisy by affirming no standards, but remains problematic. Those who avoid being hypocritical by conscientiously assessing and affirming their climate responsibilities, while being honest and adequately self-reflective about their moral failures, do significantly better epistemically than those who fail to register or acknowledge such responsibilities. But the former still lack environmental integrity on the pragmatic level, as they are not sufficiently committed to acting on their acknowledged climate responsibilities. Environmental integrity thus allows for incremental fulfillment. As with the general concept of integrity, and with other specific notions, it concerns personal qualities that agents can have more or less of (Cox et al., 2003).

According to Hourdequin (2010), a notion of integrity can be used to argue against views that affirm only political and not personal environmental responsibilities. For her, integrity requires agents to harmonize their commitments in the personal and political sphere, to make them an integral part of their lives and to thereby achieve a form of self-integration or unity (*ibid.*: 447–449). The notion of environmental integrity that I defend resembles the one articulated by Hourdequin to the extent that I also emphasize the interrelatedness and inseparability of personal and political climate action, both of which are located on the pragmatic level of this virtue. However, the present account of environmental integrity is more specific, first, when it comes to the epistemic aspects of this notion, which relate to ways in which agents think and talk about their environmental responsibilities, and second, with regards to affirming that agents can fulfill the requirements of environmental integrity to varying degrees.

Environmental integrity, as I conceive of it, can be classified among a set of virtues of sustainability, which are “those virtues that will play an especially important role in allowing us to pursue and lead sustainable, flourishing lives” (Kawall, 2021: xxvi). I hope to have clarified how environmental integrity, as it is characterized here, is an important virtue for the pursuit of sustainable lives and societies, although more space would be needed to delineate its relation to other virtues, such as simplicity, humility, cooperativeness, and conscientiousness (compare *ibid.*). The virtue of environmental responsibility (see Thompson, 2012) is also related, although I hope to have drawn the difference: An attribution of environmental integrity presupposes agreement about substantive minimum requirements entailed by the pragmatic component, but does not require agreement on the full extent of environmental responsibility of individual or collective agents. Environmental integrity is thus a useful notion whenever comprehensive agreement is hard to come by.

I can now explain how environmental integrity allows us to morally assess climate hypocrisy. Recall that hypocrisy comes in different forms (see Section 3), and includes comparatively benign manifestations, for example, when agents are unaware of a minor inconsistency between their self-portrayal and behavior, or when agents deceive themselves about having a moral motivation for a permissible action that they perform for self-interested reasons. Hypocrisy also comes in more objectionable variants, most notably when it is paired with sustained and deliberate efforts at deception. Hypocrisy is considerably more problematic if it is deeply rooted in the agent's character, such that it will be predictably reproduced over time. Such differences must also be taken into account when evaluating climate hypocrisy. I propose that whether and to what degree an instance of climate hypocrisy is morally objectionable depends on how detrimental it is to an agent's attainment of environmental integrity. Instances of climate hypocrisy must thus be judged not in isolation, but with respect to the role they play in an agent's character development over time.

In accordance with this criterion, climate hypocrisy can be very objectionable, namely when it forms a part of a group's or individual's continual effort to deceive others or themselves about their own environmental record, for financial, political or reputational gain. Companies or states whose economies are built around the continued extraction or use of fossil fuels, some of whom dare to brand themselves as leaders in "carbon-neutrality",<sup>13</sup> demonstrate a thorough lack of environmental integrity. In contrast, climate hypocrisy can also occur within an ongoing and genuine struggle to achieve environmental integrity: during an individual's attempts to attain a sustainable lifestyle or a government's or firm's transition to genuine structural decarbonization. Moreover, it makes a difference whether the inconsistency in question is a short-lived or ongoing deviation from an agent's self-representation. Take the example of a climate activist who conceals that he once broke a voluntary pledge not to fly for personal travel, compared to a politician who continuously violates a climate pledge by secretly running a campaign financed by the fossil fuel lobby. On the level of group agency, compare a government who on one occasion slightly oversells its efforts to decarbonize, with another that engages in sustained patterns of greenwashing its laissez-faire policies.

In summary, although environmental integrity epistemically requires agents to be sincere and adequately self-reflective about their ecological track record, a gradable understanding of these epistemic demands allows us to state that climate hypocrisy is less detrimental when it stems from minor forms of self-deception, compared to more pervasive self-delusions and to sustained efforts at deception. In the same vein, a gradable understanding of the pragmatic demands of environmental integrity allows us to state that climate hypocrisy is objectionable to the degree that it inhibits an agent's practical commitment to reducing environmental harm through personal and political action. Minor inconsistencies that are not pragmatically inhibitive must receive a different evaluation than hypocritical dissimulation which functions as a cover-up for sustained inaction, or even worse, for contrarian action that reverses whatever fragile political progress on climate has been made. The Trump administration's pronouncements on climate change are illustrative of the latter type of climate hypocrisy. For example, when asked by a debate moderator about his administration's stance on climate change, Trump glossed over his fossil fuel-friendly, climate contrarian agenda, by saying: "I want crystal clean water and air. I want beautiful clean air. We have now the lowest carbon. If you look at our numbers right now, we are doing phenomenally."<sup>14</sup>

Next to a gradable understanding of environmental integrity and the way in which climate hypocrisy may inhibit its attainment, we also need an account of mitigating circumstances. First, individual and collective attainment of environmental integrity may be hindered by socially adverse conditions. This is certainly the case in our profligate global economic system,

which normalizes environmentally damaging behavior, externalizes its costs, and lacks effective sanction mechanisms that would align self-interested and other-regarding reasons for sustainable agency. Second, avoiding the types of inconsistencies that give rise to climate hypocrisy is harder for governments and other group agents with many subdivisions and a complex structure that suffers from institutional inertia. One can realistically expect that governments who are truly committed to climate action will show some inconsistencies between word and deed that give rise to at least minor hypocrisies. Due to their ponderousness, group agents may display discrepancies between self-portrayal and behavior during transitional phases even as they make credible efforts to decarbonize. In contrast, inconsistencies that give rise to climate hypocrisy could also reflect a group's irresponsible environmental agency over time. Instead of a uniform condemnation of climate hypocrisy, we therefore need contextual and differentiated assessments of the degree to which the behavioral patterns in question are detrimental to the agents' attainment of environmental integrity within the given social circumstances.

The preceding observations underline the need for a normative perspective in which the goals of avoiding hypocrisy and of attaining moral integrity are understood to be intertwined. Immanuel Kant argued that a certain amount of play-acting about genuinely moral attitudes can be a good thing, as long as it strengthens or contributes to the development of genuinely moral dispositions over time (Kant, 1781/1787: A748/B776, and Kant, 1798, §14). Kant mostly restricted this developmental stage argument to comparatively benign cases. However, the more general insight contained in his view is that the evaluation of dissimulated morality should focus on whether the instance in question is detrimental or conducive to the development of moral character. I have made an analogous case for the assessment of climate hypocrisy.

## 5 | REJECTING CYNICISM ABOUT CLIMATE HYPOCRISY

I began with an outline of the perplexing diversity of the aims and valuations associable with the charge of climate hypocrisy (in Section 2). I then conceptually analyzed climate hypocrisy as the object of contention (in Section 3) and proposed an evaluative framework for it based on the notion of environmental integrity (in Section 4). In this final section, I reflect on criteria for clarifying the significance of any given accusation of climate hypocrisy.

One might think, based on the preceding line of reasoning, that an accusation of climate hypocrisy is only legitimate if it demonstrates a genuine concern for the virtue of environmental integrity and its enablement through social background conditions. Climate deniers use the hypocrisy charge to further an agenda which stands in utmost disregard of this virtue, while many hypocrisy charges made by climate activists express the relevant concern at least implicitly. Take the example of McKibben's charge against Trudeau and Turnbull, which demonstrates a concern for the environmental integrity of the accused by serving as a reminder that these heads of state must follow up their rhetoric with action (compare Section 2.2). Indeed, as I have argued above, taking the notion of environmental integrity seriously requires holding governments and their representatives accountable, not simply for expressing commitment to comprehensive decarbonization, but for holistically aligning their political agency with such commitments.

However, this way of denoting the legitimate uses of the climate hypocrisy charge runs into two challenges. First, it can be difficult to determine the degree to which agents show real concern for environmental integrity in terms of a conscientious assessment and truthful communication of their own and other people's environmental responsibilities.<sup>15</sup> Verifying the existence

of such concern requires seeing through false pretenses, which can be hard, because the motivations behind any criticism can remain obscure to an observer. However, the criterion of environmental integrity could still justify why certain types of the climate hypocrisy charge are illegitimate. It could thus provide guidance to observers who attempt to form accurate case-by-case judgments on the basis of additional empirical evidence.

But there is a second, more fundamental challenge. The agent-relativity of hypocrisy is such that one may legitimately criticize a hypocrite for dissimulating a norm without committing to the same norm (see Section 3). Imagine someone who is “pro-choice” and who points out the hypocrisy of a “pro-life” advocate who has an abortion. Clearly, this accuser need not hold that abortions are wrong. Analogously, one need not affirm the virtue of environmental integrity in order to point out climate hypocrisy. So what, if anything, is wrong with how climate deniers use this criticism?

Several things. First, even fossil fuel lobbyists now often pay lip service to the need to “address” climate change, which shows that, although one can consistently raise the climate hypocrisy charge while rejecting agential qualities associated with environmental integrity, such a stance has become unfashionable. This is reflected in the widespread shift from theoretical to practical climate denial, which can in turn be explained by the increase in general awareness of climate change and the environmental hazards it brings, including heat-waves, wild-fires, droughts, and floods. Accordingly, even fossil fuel companies now express concern for qualities associated with environmental integrity. A comprehensive examination of four American and European oil and gas majors (Chevron, ExxonMobile, BP, and Shell) found that, despite increasing tendencies to engage in green rhetoric, none of these firms “is currently on the way to a clean energy transition”, and that “accusations of greenwashing (...) are well-founded” (Li et al., 2022: 19). Disclosing the fossil fuel industry’s very own climate hypocrisy is surely one way of shedding light on the insincere manner in which their lobbyists raise the climate hypocrisy charge. It is not without irony that the work of fossil fuel lobbyists and their allies demonstrably involves a stunning amount of hypocrisy. David Runciman (2017) pointed out that professional climate deniers are hypocritical “about the doubt”. More hypocrisy can be found in their purely practical climate denial and organized delay of climate action, up to the point at which they level the hypocrisy charge theatrically and simulate moral concern to disguise their real agenda.<sup>16</sup>

Second, the accusations of fossil fuel lobbyists and their allies are standardly absent of concern for integrity in general. A cynical dictator like Putin might feel no need to dissimulate concern for the environment. If he keeps his communications consistent with his amoral stance, it is impossible to simply return the climate hypocrisy charge to him. However, anyone who voices this charge cannot consistently repudiate the importance of integrity in general without thereby counteracting the force of their accusation. There is ample empirical evidence that climate deniers lack concern for integrity in general and thereby negate the norms they commit to when they accuse others of hypocrisy. Their decades-long theoretical denial of fossil-fuel-generated global warming, whose degree they accurately predicted as early as the 1970s (Supran et al., 2023), stands in extreme opposition to the epistemic dispositions of outward-sincerity that are required for integrity (see Section 4).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the way in which climate denialists have spread the charge of climate hypocrisy reveals a lack of genuine interest in the integrity of those whom they accuse, as the following observations make clear.

Fossil-fuel lobbyists and their allies utilize both variants of the climate hypocrisy charge with the goal of preventing decarbonization by disinforming, distracting, and confusing the public about our capacities and responsibilities to solve the climate crisis. (1) With the accusation of lifestyle hypocrisy they (a) attempt to discredit proponents of climate action and deny

them the moral standing for their advocacy, and (b) individualize climate responsibility by promoting a “free-market” and anti-government ideology that reduces social and environmental problems to mere results of variations in individual agency (Schneider et al., 2016). They thus moralize the socially comprehensive task of decarbonization by obfuscating the difference between personal and political climate responsibilities and by falsely suggesting that if global heating poses any challenge at all, it resides on the level of individual consumption choices (Lamb et al., 2020; Mann, 2021, Ch. 4).<sup>18</sup> As such, the denialist use of the lifestyle hypocrisy charge is a red herring (compare Aiken, 2009: 112), because the accusers’ aim is to distract from the necessity of political climate action by steering the conversation to individual behavior. (2) Opponents of climate action frame political climate hypocrisy as resulting from an allegedly mistaken belief that governments can achieve decarbonization (Gunster et al., 2018). This is another way to pretend that “there is no alternative” to the present fossil-fuel based economic system (Schneider et al., 2016: 30, 108). Industry activists thus disseminate both variants of the accusation, alongside other falsehoods, with the aim of sabotaging our focus on and faith in our collective ability to tackle global heating through political measures.

Their indifference to the integrity of the accused is also evident when fossil fuel lobbyists and their allies often point out climate hypocrisies that are not really problematic (on the basis of the evaluative criteria outlined in Section 4). Those engaged in climate denial and delay take advantage of the fact that hypocrisy is a very widespread and multifaceted, yet poorly understood phenomenon, which occurs on all sides of the political spectrum, in more and less objectionable forms. They inflate minor inconsistencies and suggest false equivalence between very different grades of moral deficiency, as exemplified by the shopping bag “incident” involving McKibben (see Section 2). Apart from being harmless, this is not even a case of hypocrisy, assuming that McKibben has never committed to refraining from the occasional use of plastic bags. Such indiscriminate blaming only serves to undermine consensus on environmental values and to erode belief in environmentally responsible agency in the political, economic, and private realms. Overall, the denialist use of the hypocrisy charge exemplifies at least three of the six different modes of pathological blame distinguished by Miranda Fricker (2016: 168–170), insofar as: (1) the blamed party is often not even blameworthy and/or hypocritical, (2) the blame is frequently not proportionate to the wrongdoing, such as when the charge targets only minor hypocrisies, and (3) the blame is often “not expressed in the proper ethical register” (ibid.: 169), such as when a fleeting motive is misportrayed as a persistent character trait.

Of course, it may sometimes happen that accusations by climate deniers contain a correct description of a problematic case of climate hypocrisy. Whether the indisputable inconsistencies shown by “eco-celebrities”, who own multiple estates and fly in private jets, amount to hypocrisy in the sense of dissimulated virtue depends on how sincere these individuals are about their lavish lifestyles. But even those who avoid being hypocritical through admission of personal profligacy cannot avert some loss of environmental integrity. That some denialist accusations of climate hypocrisy contain kernels of truth renders the strategy more effective, but does not change the deeply dishonest manner in which they are raised.

To conclude, members of the denial and delay network show a profound lack of concern for integrity on both the epistemic and pragmatic level: on the former, they fail to truthfully assess and communicate their own and other people’s convictions and commitments; on the latter, beyond failing to fulfill their share of atmospheric responsibility as industry representatives, they sabotage the work of others who strive to create more sustainable socio-political

conditions. These actors thus stand in extreme opposition to the agential qualities associable with integrity in general.

Fossil fuel lobbyists and their allies in industry, media, and politics are not the only ones who level the charge of climate hypocrisy destructively, however, as their propaganda reaches a broad audience. As a result, many people express denialist ideas and attitudes without strategic intent. How objectionable is a non-strategic denialist use of the climate hypocrisy charge? It might be less reprehensible than calculated forms of denial, if there is no conscious deception or manipulation. It is still objectionable, however, insofar as an accuser merely voices indiscriminate cynicism about morally responsible agency and thereby fails to show a proper concern for integrity in themselves and others. In contrast to cynical uses, constructive uses of a hypocrisy charge do not function as conversation stoppers (see Dover, 2019), but as starting points for an ameliorative discussion that is adequately reflective of the behavioral aspects that can undermine the agent's integrity.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This article examined the normative significance of climate hypocrisy by analyzing different varieties and conceptual conditions and by showing how the area-specific notion of environmental integrity and the general notion of integrity may function as evaluative standards. Attaining a thorough understanding of climate hypocrisy's relevance can help us transcend the unhealthy fixation on agential consistency, which alone is of little value. All too often, the charge of hypocrisy is made in an indiscriminate manner that obscures morally significant differences between varieties of inconsistency. This article makes the case for focusing on a positive and substantive correlate: Instead of worrying about short-term consistency, the aim should be to establish the long-term conditions for environmental responsibility and integrity, and for moral integrity more generally. Such a focus equips us with the intellectual means to counter one common method by which cynicism and divisiveness are spread—by those who deliberately misuse moral language in their reckless pursuit of economic and political power, and by those who fall prey to their manipulations.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My preoccupation with climate hypocrisy goes back at least as far as 2018, when I prepared for a conversation with Petra Pinzler about climate responsibility and sincerity which was published in German in the weekly magazine *Die ZEIT*. I have presented parts of this paper in the political philosophy section of the XXV. Congress of the German Society for Philosophy in September 2021 (moved from 2020 due to the pandemic). I am grateful to this audience, as well as to Daniel Baumann, Chantal Lill, Sarah Hegenbart, Lisa Herzog and Stephanie Struthmann for valuable feedback. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the two anonymous referees for the *Journal of Social Philosophy* for their appreciative, thoughtful and purposeful comments on this article. Finally, a special thanks to Elise Hedemann for in-depth discussions of the text and for her tremendous help with native language editing. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. [Corrections made on 27 May 2023, after first online publication: Endnote 19 was deleted and Acknowledgments were corrected in this version.]

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

None.

## ORCID

Valentin Beck  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7936-1025>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This article only accommodates a condensed overview of the debate which, together with fn. 2 and subsequent in-text-references, clarifies how its unified interpretation of hypocrisy as dissimulation compares to other positions in the theoretical landscape.
- <sup>2</sup> Neither Jay Wallace nor Daniela Dover explicitly focus on the problem of conceptual unity, but they highlight the evaluative plurality of hypocrisy (Wallace, 2010, 308–17; Dover, 2019, 389). Before focusing on “hypocritical moral address” as one specific form of hypocrisy, Wallace helpfully contextualizes this form within the general phenomenon, which he broadly frames in terms of religious and moral dissimulation (Wallace, 2010, 309–11). In this respect, and some others (as indicated by the in-text-references), the account defended in this article bears a proximity to Wallace’s. However, this article specifies the general characteristics of hypocrisy as dissimulation in more detail and gives roughly equal consideration to different modes of hypocrisy, instead of focusing on hypocritical blame, in order to account for the various ways climate hypocrisy can occur.
- <sup>3</sup> On the distinction between ethical and moral considerations, see for example, Dworkin (2000: 242–276). In this article, I use “personal qualities” and “virtues” interchangeably and in the broadest possible sense, denoting praiseworthy character traits without implying the validity of any particular theory about the ethical and moral good (such as virtue ethics, consequentialism or Kantian moral theory).
- <sup>4</sup> For example, hypocritical virtue signaling can be motivated by a desire “to convince others that one is morally respectable”, which Tosi and Warmke (2016) have aptly termed “moral grandstanding” (ibid.: 199).
- <sup>5</sup> See Crisp and Cowton (1994), however, for a broader conceptualization of hypocrisy.
- <sup>6</sup> There is no need to deny that agents can be hypocritical in criticism of government agents or firms, if they thereby pretend moral qualities that they do not possess. The view refuted here is that such criticisms necessarily involve hypocrisy on the part of profligate individuals. It would be excessively cynical to assume that agents always engage in such criticism for the purpose of self-promotion.
- <sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/gretathunberg/status/1174071589371088896?lang=en>.
- <sup>8</sup> Despite the focus on individual and political climate hypocrisy in sections I. and II., the preceding conceptual outline is also applicable to cases of corporate climate hypocrisy (especially in virtue of the fifth condition). See Section 5. for a discussion of how fossil fuel corporations engage in virtue dissimulation.
- <sup>9</sup> Agents might also strategically admit to faults in order to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy and gain approval for being “real” and “relatable”. Such a strategy is self-defeatingly hypocritical insofar as the sincerity is dissimulated.
- <sup>10</sup> Such plural justifiability, which I lack the space to demonstrate here, corresponds with my substantively neutral usage of the concept of “virtue”. See note iii.
- <sup>11</sup> The philosophical debate on the concept of integrity is surprisingly young and leaves room for further refinement (see Cox et al. 2003, xviii). The evocative but overly simplistic early views of integrity pronounced by Frankfurt and Williams have been followed by more complex accounts. Among these, Cheshire Calhoun (1995) has persuasively criticized the integrated-self, identity-based and ‘clean hands’ views of integrity in favor of the idea of sincerely standing up for what is worth doing, in deliberation with others. Damian Cox et al. (2003) emphasize the importance of self-knowledge and of balancing self-conflict, while Greg Scherkoske (2013) proposes that integrity is an epistemic virtue. Given this article’s applied focus, I am assembling what I take to be important insights from these accounts, as indicated by the in-text-references, without preferring one of these accounts over the others. This allows me to use a somewhat ecumenical understanding of integrity with which the area-specific notion of environmental integrity corresponds.

- <sup>12</sup> Compare the second condition in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, which defines “integrity” as: (1) “an uncompromising adherence to a code of moral, artistic, or other values; (2) utter sincerity, honesty, candor; avoidance of deception, expediency, artificiality, or shallowness of any kind” (cited after Cox et al. [2003: 1.]).
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/opinion/doubts-over-world-cups-carbon-neutrality-underline-need-for-high-integrity-credits/>.
- <sup>14</sup> <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/30/presidential-debate-read-full-transcript-first-debate/3587462001/>.
- <sup>15</sup> Someone can show a genuine concern for integrity without already (fully) possessing integrity, insofar as they can conscientiously and truthfully assess the mismatch between their own (or others’) actions, convictions and commitments. Cox et al. (2003: 14) rightly observe that a preoccupation with integrity is neither a precondition nor a certain sign of having integrity. However, a healthy and measured concern for integrity is not harmful in itself, and for those who do not yet have integrity, being so concerned is a step in the right direction.
- <sup>16</sup> See Schneider et al. (2016, Ch. 5) for the coal lobby’s use of the climate hypocrisy charge. Judith Shklar (1984) was an early and shrewd analyst of the destructive discursive settings in which insincere accusations of hypocrisy produce even more hypocrisy. See also Wallace (2010: 308).
- <sup>17</sup> Cassam Quassim (2019, Ch. 4) therefore categorizes the attitude of climate denialists as “epistemic malevolence”.
- <sup>18</sup> Supran and Oreskes (2021) note that “the very notion of a personal ‘carbon footprint’ was first popularized in 2004–2006 by oil firm BP as part of its \$100+ million per year ‘beyond petroleum’ US media campaign” (ibid.: 712).

## REFERENCES

- Aiken, Scott. 2009. “The Significance of Al Gore’s Purported Hypocrisy.” *Environmental Ethics* 31(1): 111–2.
- Brulle, Robert J. 2013. “Institutionalizing Delay: Foundation Funding and the Creation of U.S. Climate Change Counter-Movement Organizations.” *Climatic Change* 122(4): 681–94.
- Calhoun, Cheshire. 1995. “Standing for Something.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 92(5): 235–60.
- Caney, Simon. 2018. “Climate Change.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Distributive Justice*, edited by Serena Olsaretti. Oxford: OUP.
- Carrington, Damian. 2020. “Hypocrites and Greenwash: Greta Thunberg Blasts Leaders over Climate Crisis”, *The Guardian*, November 9, 2020.
- Cassam, Quassim. 2019. *Vices of the Mind. From the Intellectual to the Political* 2019. Oxford: OUP.
- Cho, Charles H., Martin L. Martens, Hakkyun Kim, and Michelle Rodrigue. 2011. “Astroturfing Global Warming: It Isn’t Always Greener on the Other Side of the Fence.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 104: 571–87.
- Cox, Damian, Marguerite La Caze, and Michael Levine. 2003. *Integrity and the Fragile Self*. London, NY: Routledge.
- Crisp, Roger, and Christopher Cowton. 1994. “Hypocrisy and Moral Seriousness.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31(4): 343–9.
- Dover, Daniela. 2019. “The Walk and the Talk.” *Philosophical Review* 128(4): 387–422.
- Dunlap, Riley E., and Aaron M. McCright. 2011. “Organized Climate Change Denial.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlossberg, 2011. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2000. *Sovereign Virtue. The Theory and Practice of Equality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fragnière, Augustin. 2016. “Climate Change and Individual Duties.” *WIREs Climate Change* 7: 798–814.
- Frankfurt, Harry. 1986. “On Bullshit.” *Raritan Quarterly Review* 6(2): 81–100.
- Fricke, Miranda. 2016. “What’s the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation.” *Noûs* 50(1): 165–83.
- Gardiner, Stephen. 2011. *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*. Oxford: OUP.

- Gunster, Shane, Darren Fleet, Matthew Paterson, and Paul Saurette. 2018. "Why Don't you Act like you Believe it?": Competing Visions of Climate Hypocrisy." *Frontiers in Communication* 3(49): 1–14.
- Hourdequin, Marion. 2010. "Climate, Collective Action and Individual Ethical Obligations." *Environmental Values* 19(4): 442–64.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1781/1787. *Critique of Pure Reason*, Vol 1998, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1798. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Vol 2006, edited by Roubert E. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kawall, Jason. 2004. "On Complacency." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43(4): 342–55.
- Kawall, Jason. 2021. *The Virtues of Sustainability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lamb, William F., Giulio Mattioli, Sebastian Levi, J. Timmons Roberts, Stuart Capstick, Felix Creutzig, Jan C. Minx, Finn Müller-Hansen, Trevor Culhane, and Julia K. Steinberger. 2020. "Discourses of Climate Delay." *Global Sustainability* 3(17): 1–5.
- Li, Mei, Gregory Trencher, and Jusen Asuka. 2022. "The Clean Energy Claims of BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil and Shell: A Mismatch between Discourse, Actions and Investments." *PLoS One* 17(2): 1–27.
- List, Christian, and Philip Pettit. 2011. *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mann, Michael E. 2021. *The New Climate War: The Fight to Take Back our Planet*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.
- McKibben, Bill. 2016. "Embarrassing Photos of me, Thanks to my Right-Wing Stalkers", *The New York Times*, August 5, 2016.
- McKibben, Bill. 2017. "Stop Swooning over Justin Trudeau. The Man Is a Disaster for the Planet", *The Guardian*, April 17, 2017.
- McKinnon, Christine. 1991. "Hypocrisy, with a Note on Integrity." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28(4): 321–33.
- Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. 2012. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Readfearn, Graham. 2019. "Rupert Murdoch Says 'there Are no Climate Change Deniers around' News Corp", *The Guardian*, November 21, 2019.
- Runciman, David. 2017. "How Climate Science Scepticism Turned into Something more Dangerous", *The Guardian*, July 7, 2017.
- Scherkoske, Greg. 2013. *Integrity and the Virtues of Reason. Leading a Convincing Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schneider, Jen, Steve Schwarze, Peter K. Bsumek, and Jennifer Peebles. 2016. *Under Pressure: Coal Industry Rhetoric and Neoliberalism*. London: Palgrave.
- Shklar, Judith N. 1984. *Ordinary Vices*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Statman, Daniel. 1997. "Hypocrisy and Self-Deception." *Philosophical Psychology* 10(1): 57–75.
- Stevenson, Hayley. 2021. "Reforming Global Climate Governance in an Age of Bullshit." *Globalizations* 18(1): 86–102.
- Supran, Geoffrey, and Naomi Oreskes. 2021. "Rhetoric and Frame Analysis of ExxonMobil's Climate Change Communications." *One Earth* 4: 696–719.
- Supran, Geoffrey, Stefan Rahmstorf, and Naomi Oreskes. 2023. "Assessing ExxonMobil's Global Warming Projections." *Science* 379(6628): 1–9.
- Szabados, Béla, and Eldon Soifer. 2004. *Hypocrisy: Ethical Investigations*. New York, NY: Broadview Press.
- Taylor, Gabrielle. 1985. *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, Allen. 2012. "The Virtue of Responsibility for the Global Climate." In *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change. Human Virtues of the Future*, edited by Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, 203–21. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Tosi, Justin, and Brandon Warmke. 2016. "Moral Grandstanding." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44(3): 197–217.
- Wallace, R. Jay. 2010. "Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 38(4): 307–41.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Valentin Beck is a lecturer in Philosophy at the Freie Universität Berlin. He was formerly a Feodor Lynen Visiting Research Fellow at UC Berkeley and lecturer at the Goethe University of Frankfurt and the University of Bremen. He is the author of *Eine Theorie der globalen Verantwortung* (Suhrkamp) and Co-Editor of *Dimensions of Poverty* (Springer). His research on global justice theory, poverty, fair trade and consumer ethics has appeared in various journals and anthologies, including: *Journal of Applied Philosophy*; *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*; *WIREs Climate Change*; *Global Justice: Theory, Practice, Rhetoric*; and *Zeitschrift für Praktische Philosophie*.

**How to cite this article:** Beck, Valentin. 2025. "Climate Hypocrisy and Environmental Integrity." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 56(2): 223–242. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12522>