

# Public Ethics Radio

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## Episode 20, Garrett Cullity on Climate Change

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**MATT PETERSON:** This is Public Ethics Radio, I'm Matt Peterson.

How do we assign moral responsibility for climate change? We can all probably agree that as a country, the United States is responsible to some extent. After all, it emits a lot of carbon, has the ability to pay for solutions, and knows should be doing something about it.

But what about individual American citizens? Climate change is a collective phenomenon. It's going to happen—or not—regardless of what any particular person does. Individuals may not want to emit carbon, but they don't have much choice about their participation in the overall system.

Our guest today, Garrett Cullity, sees a paradox here. Although it's easy to trace the empirical relationship between individual carbon emissions and systemic climate change, he thinks it's not so easy to track the moral relationship between individual and collective responsibility for climate change.

Garrett Cullity spoke to our host, Christian Barry.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** Today we're joined by Professor Garrett Cullity from the University of Adelaide. We're going to be discussing the issue of individual and collective responsibility, mostly but not entirely with reference to climate change.

Garrett Cullity, thank you for joining us.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** It's a pleasure to be with you.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So why don't I start by just asking, what makes addressing the issue of climate change such a difficult issue, ethically speaking, at least at the level of individuals?

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yeah. It seems to me the big kind of questions—at least the ones that engage me—are ones concerning the relationship between collective obligations and individual ones. I mean, if together the human population is warming up the planet in a way that leads to really detrimental effects on people in the future, then it's pretty clear that that's a good moral reason for not doing that, or for curbing our collective action. But how we get from that to conclusions about what an individual ought to do, it seems to me, is not empirically complicated but it's morally very complicated.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So whenever we're moving from a situation where it seems relatively straightforward what we together ought to do to what I as an individual or we as an individual nation ought to do, there are two extreme answers, as it were.

One is that what we should do, individually, is what our share would be if we were all doing what we ought to do. So whether or not others are doing their share, whether or not others are complying with policies that will reduce carbon emissions and so on, is irrelevant to what I ought to do.

Another type of extreme position is that, in fact, there is no easy translation from collective to individual. And that if it's the case that my doing something is not going to do anything because of what others are going to do, I have no moral reason at all to do what would be my share if others are doing their share.

So do you think either of these views is plausible, or if ... ?

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Okay, so now we're getting complicated. So let's take the first one first. So this was the suggestion that in order to work out the obligations of the individual, we start with what we all ought together to be doing and then we figure out the individual's fair share of that collective obligation.

If, say, you and I, Christian, are walking along the beach and there are two drowning people in the water and you've got a radio program to present and you're too busy to help either of those individuals, I can't then stand on the beach by myself and say: "Well, my fair share is only one of the two drowning people, so I'll save one and I'll let the other person drown."

In a situation like that it seems pretty clear that the person who hasn't discharged their original responsibility—namely you who've walked off—is acting wrongly. But that doesn't let me off the hook. So I'm, it seems, not let off the hook by others not discharging their share of the overall responsibility.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** You might have a claim against me but that doesn't serve to extinguish your duty to help the people.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yeah, right, so certainly I can say you've treated me unfairly in imposing this extra burden on me. But if I don't help the second person who needs to be helped, then they can address a complaint not only against you, but against me, because I was there, I could have helped the second person and didn't bother to do so.

So there seem pretty clearly to be cases in which, sure, we can blame the people who don't discharge their fair share. But then a question arises for those of us who are left as to why we're not prepared to at least do something to pick up the slack which is left by others.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So the case in which you've just described is a case where an individual can nevertheless make a difference. So it may be that there are others around who would make it easier to achieve some outcome—

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Right.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** —but they don't, their noncompliant with what they ought to do

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Right.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** —doesn't make it impossible to save the people involved.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yep.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So what's really at stake for the other individual is taking on additional cost to achieve that objective. But arguably climate change may not be that sort of situation—

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yes.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** —at least with respect to some agents. So it may well be that it'll simply be futile, that the effects of climate change, at least with respect to a country, say, the size of Norway or Australia, may just be negligible if the other much more populous nations and much larger total emitters continue going as they go.

So in that sort of case, what should the individual agent do in the face of this noncompliance from others?

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Right, yeah, so this as I recall it takes us onto your other extreme. So the second extreme view is to say, well, what I should consider is really simply what effect my individual action will have on the welfare of others. And if my action as an individual has negligible effect, then there can't be any obligation on me at all.

And here's a common circumstance in which that kind of reasoning seems patently inadequate as well. And it's situations that we might describe as free-riding. So this is where together we ought to do something, and everyone else is pitching in, and the question is whether I'm prepared to do what I should reasonably be able to see everyone is required to do in order to produce a good outcome.

So to make that less abstract, I think the moral reason to pay your taxes is of that form. So quite plausibly, if one citizen of the country finds a way of evading paying their taxes altogether, the effects on others will be not just small but negligible, because of the way that budgeting for the provision of public services works. It's not as though there'll be a little extra gap in the curbing on the road if I fail to pay my taxes and consequently the government's income from taxes is smaller.

So the objection against me in this case, if I fail to pay my taxes, is not that it harms anyone if I do this, but just that I'm treating everyone else unfairly. I'm arrogating to myself the privilege of not paying taxes when the practice of doing so by everyone else produces benefits, perhaps benefits that I have a share in myself.

So there seem to be many circumstances in which the fact that we ought to be doing something and we're doing it means that I'm treating other people unfairly if I'm not joining in.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So is the case of responsibility with respect to climate change similarly structured as the problem you just described? Because one way of looking at that

case is you have a standing practice, a standing practice to deliver certain types of goods for people, and it's unfair for somebody who benefits from this practice not to comply with the terms of that practice. They really are being a free-rider.

But insofar as we actually don't have a practice, so we don't have meaningful targets that are agreed to that are really complied with, we don't have binding treaties, we don't have these sorts of practices, in what sense does one holdout who says, "Listen, I'll do it if others do it or enough others do it. But enough others aren't doing it, so my doing it isn't going to make any difference. So I'm not really free-riding. I'm simply being wise and not being a sucker who takes on cost to no particular end."

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Right, yeah. That's quite right. So the cases in which we can be accused of free-riding are cases in which there already is a collective action taking place in respect to which the free-riding is occurring.

Let's suppose, as is in fact the case, that the water supply in Adelaide is inadequate. So what we ought to do, as citizens of Adelaide, is to increase the water reservoir capacity. But we're not doing that at the moment.

It can't be the case that I'm morally required to get my spade and walk off into the Adelaide hills and start digging a little hole in the ground which is big enough to mean that, if every citizen of Adelaide joined in, we'd solve the problem. It's a tokenistic gesture.

And it seems hard in the case of individual relations to climate change to avoid the point that, even though there certainly are actions that we all ought to be taking in order to do something about it, if we're not taking those actions, then we face the question: why isn't an individual contribution just as tokenistic as the unilateral digging of the hole in this little example?

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** That certainly seems to be a relevant difference between the nation level and the individual level. At least one thing that that argument that I've just mentioned doesn't seem to affect is the idea that each country should formally make a contingent commitment to doing something, so long as enough others go along to do that.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yes.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** And so far they're not doing that, right?

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yes.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So that certainly wouldn't let them off the hook.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Absolutely.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** And that of course is also something that an individual can't do. So when we talk about what individual obligations are, usually things that are mentioned are paying carbon offsets, limiting personal use of goods that require the burning of fossil fuels, and so on and so forth.

And that, arguably, really does start to look tokenistic, right? So that we can certainly place blame on the individual country and its citizens insofar as they don't support these kinds of

contingent commitments like these. But what we can we really say about this individual who simply says, “Why should I be bearing this cost? It’s really not making any difference to anyone. I’m not free-riding on any practice, because there is no practice.”

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yeah. There is one other kind of way, it seems to me, in which there are serious moral objections to individual conduct which derive from the wrongness of a collective practice, and which do generate unilateral requirements.

What I have in mind here is where there’s a group action which is highly undesirable, and I shouldn’t join that action no matter what other people are doing at all. So if, say, there’s a gang that’s treating someone badly, then my action of joining in the gang, even if it doesn’t make a difference to what the gang achieves, is something that can be morally criticized.

If I, say, agree to guard the door while the gang treats someone terribly inside a building, then if no police come past and I don’t need to shout a warning—I don’t actually take any positive steps to make the gang do what it does—there is still an objection to my conduct because I’ve joined in something that’s morally bad. But here again my joining in doesn’t make a difference to how badly or well-off people are as a result.

So, broadly speaking, I think there are three ways in which an individual’s actions can actually be criticized as morally wrong because of their relationship to a larger group. One way is where it actually makes a discernible difference to what’s achieved by the group and leaves people better or worse off. The second way is where I’m free-riding on what the group is doing and I should be joining in whether or it makes anyone worse off. And the third case is where the group is doing something terrible and I shouldn’t be joining in, even if my joining in doesn’t make a difference to anyone’s welfare.

But in this last case, again, it seems pretty difficult to see a really convincing application to our situation in relation to climate change.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** Why would that be? So one way you could see it as parallel to that situation is that we are all joining in, in terms of, if you have some notion of what a fair share of emissions would be—so what, if we were all doing it, would be such that it would stabilize global temperatures and would not lead to all these really bad circumstances. So insofar as I’m doing anything above that, in what sense am I not joining in with others in some larger activity which has disastrous consequences so that it’s a more complicated story than the person that stands guard by the door, but nevertheless I am still joining in this type of harmful activity.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** So there may actually be some way of finding something morally problematic in my relationship to the group here. But it’s hard to see what that is, for the following reason.

If we ask why is the guy who stands on the door, while the gang is behaving immorally, why is that guy acting wrongly in doing so? It’s because of the way in which he actually makes himself part of the intentions or planning of the group.

So if, by contrast, what the gang has done is to rig up his mobile phone to a bomb that goes off somewhere, and he presses the buttons on his phone and something terrible happens, then

he's been inadvertently caught up in the activities of the gang. He hasn't become part of the intentional planning or activity of the group toward producing a bad result.

And in the case of the relation of each of us to climate change, yes, there's a sense in which we're all implicated because we causally interact with each other, and this bad result occurs overall. But we're not involved in intentional planning or deliberation or directing the collective actions of the group towards the production of the bad effect.

In fact, it seems in this case, although there's behavior that we together perform, there isn't collective action in the strong sense of deliberation, planning, intention, a structure of accepting reasons and directing our agency towards a result. Which is what we've got in the case of the gang.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So surely there's a difference between a gang where there's a collective plan, there's coordinated agency, and so on, than in the case of climate change. And, clearly, participating in the activities of the gang is worse simply because it's part of the aim of the gang to bring about this harm, whereas it's not the case with respect to climate change.

Most people would be very happy if it turned out that their activities didn't lead to all these harmful effects. In fact they'd welcome it. It'd be a happy news item. But is that really necessary for establishing the individual responsibility for joining in?

So if you imagine a case where instead of a gang there's just a local watering hole. And it costs something to get rid of your junk that you have in your home and you could either take a long walk to another village where there's a proper dump and you can dump your stuff there, or you could dump it in the watering hole.

Now, of course, nobody really wants to pollute the water of the watering hole. In fact they'd love it if there was a dump nearby, and they'd probably be willing to take on a little bit of cost to do that. But there isn't. And so they recognize that as a side effect, that of everybody's dumping in, it's going to have this bad effect; it's not part of their plan, they're not coordinated, they're just individually doing something. They're doing it to avoid cost and because they want to have the convenience of doing so.

That clearly seems to be a case where all of them are joining in, perhaps not in a collective action, but engaging in a type of activity which is bringing about harm, which could be consequently put on their debit, as it were, as responsible agents.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Mmm. Yeah so now we're sort of zeroing in on what I think is really quite a close analogy to our relationship to impacts on the climate.

Here's the question I just want to press. Would it actually be morally wrong for me to take the view that, of course, if a properly organized system for disposing of our waste more responsibly was devised, I should join in that activity, even if not doing so would be like evading my taxes and not have an impact on people, but here there would be a collective action that is sensible and I'm free-riding if I don't join in.

So I could insist that I would join in if there were an effective collective action. But now that there isn't, I'm not harming anyone. Where's the moral objection to what I'm doing?

And in a way, that is our situation in relation to climate change. It's plausible that there are bad effects which are produced by all of us putting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The impact of your or my or any one person's doing so is negligible. Perhaps even the impact of a small country is negligible.

We should each be prepared to join in the collective action that is devised. But perhaps there's a sort of morally tragic structure to the situation we face at the moment, where, well, it's not actually true that any one individual does anything wrong by doing the dumping.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** Let's look at this scenario, same situation, from the perspective of the victims.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Right.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So let's imagine in this sort of case that—obviously with climate change the types of people who are threatened or at risk are varied. But let's stay with our simple case.

**GARRET CULLITY:** Yes.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** And then we can talk about them.

So from the perspective of victims, imagine if you were to be giving reasons to a person down from the lake. So we're all dumping in. Why is it harmful? It's harmful because basically it pollutes the water supply of this lake, it goes down—there are people who live down the stream, and they can't fish. Their livelihoods are threatened. Or when they do eat fish they suffer health problems and so on and so forth.

Imagine those people downstream, looking up at all of us upstream as we're doing our dumping. And one thing to ask is: if they could try to forcibly prevent one of us from dumping, would they be permitted to do so? And I think a lot of people would say yes, they could probably collectively take significant action.

So I wonder similarly with climate change, whether or not that it may look tragic from the point of view of the individual standing upstream, but if we actually take the perspective of those downstream, and take what they have a claim to do on their own behalf, it seems hard to reconcile with this idea that there's something morally innocent, ultimately, about the individual behavior upstream.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yeah, the perspective shift is good. So is there anything inconsistent about thinking, yes, the downstreamers are justified in protecting themselves from the impacts that are produced by the upstreamers collectively doing what they're doing.

Now the downstreamers can't single any one upstreamer out and point the finger at that person for harming them, because there isn't any upstreamer who actually themselves affects the downstreamers in any discernible way at all.

But they are being harmed by the overall action of the upstreamers, and so they're justified in protecting themselves from that harm. Doing so is going to constrain the upstreamers from acting in the way that they're acting and that can be justified.

It's also the case that it'd be wrong for each individual upstreamer not to join in an action of collective self-restraint. But at the same time, no individual upstreamer acts wrongly. That seems to me a consistent group of claims, and maybe it's also true.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So, imagine the case of the individual upstreamer. There's nothing for them to join in. They see all the other people dumping. They realize their dumping is not going to make a difference. So they say "Well, it's unfortunate, I'd love to be part of it, but I dump because the others are dumping."

Now one way of saying is, that if that seems plausible, we could say they do nothing wrong. But is that possible—is that plausible if we think about when a situation arises where they could later take on additional cost to help downstreamers as opposed to any other needy people in the world?

And many people I think have the intuition that they do, right? That if there was something they could do to at least mitigate the effects of their dumping on the people downstream individually, they would have a special and fairly stringent obligation to those downstreamers, different than they would to some other needy person who were not at the end of this sort of conduct.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yeah, so here again I'm just going to want to emphasize the difference between the "they" collectively and "they" individually. So yeah, they collectively ought not to be harming the people downstream. But does any individual member of the group harm anyone? The answer might be no.

So here's another analogous case which—where I think that there's a bit of an intuition shift. So think of situations where we together ought to give a collective apology to a group that's been wronged by us. And it may be a case of historical injustice or that there are some situations in which the apology ought to be delivered by the group, all of whose members were still alive at the time that the wrong was done.

If it's true that I can't actually deliver the group apology myself, nor can I—am I influential enough to change the behavior of the entire group, then there isn't anything wrong that I've done. I should be prepared to join in with an effective group apology if it's being delivered. But when it's not delivered, then maybe no individual member of the group who could actually deliver it or who could influence its being true that the group gives it.

So there's a case where the group acts wrongly. The group should apologize. And if they don't, then there is a subject of the action against whom the blame can be directed. Here it's a collective subject. But each individual member of the group seems to be morally innocent. And so if there are situations which can have that structure, where we have a group that wrongs, that acts wrongly, even though no individual member of the group acts wrongly, it's possible that the upstreamers are in that situation.

Now I suppose I'm enough of a moralistic type to think I don't want to let myself and any other individual off the moral hook too easily. And it sounds kind of convenient in a way to

think of climate change or the situation of the upstreamers in that way. But if what we think is the central issue here is whether harm is done to individuals and who does the harm, then it seems possible that there can be situations involving very large groups in which the large group is a harmer, does harm, but no individual member of the group harms anyone.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** We're discussing moral paradoxes, including responsibilities to address global climate change, with Garrett Cullity. We're going to take a brief break and be right back.

**MATT PETERSON:** You're listening to Public Ethics Radio.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So one of the things we've been talking about is this difficulty of squaring individual responsibilities with collective responsibilities, and we've identified what seems at least to be a possible paradox of responsibility, in that there are many cases in which we collectively have joint responsibilities to join in on various activities to create institutions, to initiate practices, and so on and so forth. But insofar as they are not put out, insofar as others are not doing so, it doesn't necessarily follow that I have an obligation to do anything or that I do wrong in failing to act as I would otherwise be obligated to do.

So if that's the case with respect to climate change, how do you address the individual? That is, if the individual seems neither to be a free-rider nor they're simply in a position where they can take on a little extra cost than they would otherwise take on to achieve the benefit, nor can they really be seen as individuals to be harming anybody, what can possibly ground the responsibility of individuals to do anything, to take on any additional cost to address this issue of climate change?

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Right, yeah. Here's one way of looking at it. What we've been talking about so far is wrongness and permissibility. That's not the only really important and motivating moral consideration that actually gets people to act. And one thing that I suppose motivates us, and we might think is in some ways more important, is thinking about what might be admirable or might express a commitment to important values and so forth.

So think about consuming lots of unnecessary material goods. Many of us are motivated not to do that, not by the thought that it harms anyone if I consume all this unnecessary material stuff, but partly by what kind of life I individually want to lead and also by sort of distaste for certain ways of interacting, certain ways of organizing society, organizing individual lives.

And that's—it's not as though I'm wronging anyone if I buy five unnecessary TVs. But there's a reason, an expressive commitment to a certain kind of lifestyle, and alignment of myself with particular ways of life, that I think is motivating and can be a reason for action.

And so coming back to the relation of an individual towards what's happening globally to the planet and consumption of energy in a way that leads to more greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. You might think one set of moral questions is, "Am I harming others?" And a separate set of questions is "What kind of—where do I want to align myself? What kind of life do I want to lead and what kind of collective way of living do I want to be part of?"

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** One thing that I could imagine having a bit of an issue with that sort of approach to this issue is that it seems to deny that there would be any rights or claims on behalf of the victims against individuals that they would make any such changes.

So, you know, it's often the language that agitates people, that makes people feel that something is really going on here. It's the idea that through our collective activity there are wrongs being committed against individual people—

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yes.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** —and these people's rights are being violated and they have claims.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yep.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** And there's a sense in which we could say, yes, of course, they have claims against, on the group or on a groups' activities.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yeah.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** But one other thing that motivates people is this idea that there's someone else that has a claim against them because of what they're doing, that they're somehow, with others, infringing the rights of these people.

And that kind of language doesn't seem to pick up on that.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yeah, so this takes us back towards some of our earlier paradoxes. Or at least, the things that I was claiming may have this paradoxical structure.

So I think it does follow from the suggestion I was making earlier that it's a least questionable whether there's a right against me as an individual. So whether I bear a duty, the correlative of which is a right that some other individual possesses that they get redress from me.

And I do think, actually, that the example of the collective apology is one that does have the structure where a group that has been wronged does have a right to redress, or to compensation, from the group that has wronged them. But there's no individual who can be pointed to within the redressing group against whom that right is, I suppose, exercisable, or can be applied. So there certainly is a right to an apology, but the bearer of the correlative duty is the group and not the individual.

So once more, we might think yes, there certainly are rights not to be harmed, and perhaps generations in the future can correctly say, "Our rights have been violated because these previous generations used up resources and left us with a polluted environment that has imposed these burdens on us that we wouldn't otherwise bear." But we can't point back to any one individual as having violated our rights, because after all no individual imposed that burden or left us with a discernibly worse-off environment at all.

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** So then the puzzle of individual and collective responsibility is not dissolved in a way, but it's twisted. So your approach would be to say that we as individual should not be focusing on this question of what our individuals obligations are but of what we want to express in terms of our attitudes about what is an appropriate lifestyle and so on and so forth.

**GARRETT CULLITY:** Yeah. Yeah. And that's a question that we should all ask ourselves independently of whether I've wronged anyone or whether there's any rights of any individual that I've violated.

I suppose the other thing I'm a bit sort of reluctant about in the line that I've been taking is that there's—it can sound a bit morally cowardly. As if each of us can hide behind the defense that I myself am not harming any individual in the future and so my hands are completely morally clean.

And I think often the answer is that there are individuals who are going beyond what anyone has a right to ask of them, who are actually producing the moral leadership that actually allows some of these collective actions to occur. So if we go back to some of the moral revolutions that have occurred in getting rid of, say, child labor in countries where that has been got rid of.

I would again think that it's not actually clear that any Victorian family that was employing a chimney sweep back in the days of Dickensian London, when that was a widespread practice, were violating the rights of any individual. But nonetheless there certainly has been moral progress in regulating the labor market in such a way that child labor is no longer permitted.

But it took leadership that went above and beyond the call of duty, so-called supererogation on the part of some extremely admirable people to make this happen. And what motivated them was not, I think, questions of individual harm and individual benefit, but it was thinking, "This group really ought to be acting differently. And if it's not me who does something about it, then who else is going to do something? And so I'll do it."

**CHRISTIAN BARRY:** Garrett Cullity, thanks for joining us on Public Ethics Radio

**GARRETT CULLITY:** It's been a pleasure, thank you.

**MATT PETERSON:** Thanks for listening to Public Ethics Radio. The show is produced by me, Matt Peterson, and Barbara Clare. Christian Barry is our host. The show is supported by the Centre for Moral, Social, and Political Theory at the Australian National University and the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.

We'll be back soon with another conversation about Public Ethics. In the meantime, you can find us on the web at [publicethicsradio.org](http://publicethicsradio.org).

Thanks for listening.