The Ethics of Environmentalism for the Individual Consumer

Molly Collins, Advised by Dr. Jessica Flanigan
Jepson School of Leadership Studies Senior Honors Thesis
University of Richmond, VA 23173

Abstract
Climate change harms the health of the environment and the well-being of humans. It is the poor choices of individual consumers that contribute to climate change conditions. I argue that it is immoral to cause harm to others, thus climate change is an ethical dilemma for individual consumers. Enforcement of climate change policies are therefore justified, as individuals who cause harm through consumer behavior are liable to punishment. I begin with a pluralistic discussion of harm, before discussing the duties of individuals to make choices that will mitigate the current harms of climate change and the wrong moral assumptions that individuals make regarding their contribution to climate change. I discuss the principles of ethical consumerism which explain how consumers make choices, specifically in housing, food, and transportation. These three areas are useful for the argument of individual choice and climate change because they are where consumers most often make choices that have such a large impact on the environment.

Lastly, I argue that climate change is an enforceable duty on the premise that those who cause or threaten harm are liable for their actions and that individuals are equally as liable for the collective well-being. I conclude with suggestions for new policies specifically regarding the use of plastic, taxing individual energy use, and food production.

Harm Principle
I create a pluralistic moral theory of harm to apply to my argument to change harms caused by individuals. This pluralistic approach, rather than a utilitarian method, allows for a more basic understanding of how individuals contribute to, and mitigate harm in different scenarios. The following are the accounts of harm that I recognize:

• The comparative account defines harm as a comparatively worse state of being after an event than if it had not happened.
• The non-comparative account defines harm as an injury to well-being.
• The capabilities approach defines harm as the removal of liberty to make an autonomous decision.
• The non-consequentialist argument defines harm as a violation of a right possessed by the victim.

Principles of Ethical Consumerism
1. People can make ethical choices. Principles of social justice and ecological citizenship prove that there are inherent internal drivers to do the right thing and they can be expressed through purchasing choices.
2. There are deep psychological roots behind consumerism and why people make the choices they do. Having too many options leads to a values-actions gap between what the consumer thinks he cares about versus what he shows he cares about through his purchases. Branding of products is a powerful strategy to sway purchasing decisions.
3. A reversal test can demonstrate people's status quo bias, proving that eliminating climate change would be better than the opposite of reverting to pre-Industrial status.

Individuals contribute to climate change, climate change poses a serious threat, and therefore individuals are liable to consequences. Theories for the justification of enforcement include:
• Enforcement and Wrongful Harm: A person is liable to be interfered with if he presents a lethal or serious threat. There are varying degrees of responses or consequences for different threats. Driving a car is less serious to murder but is still liable to consequences.
• Enforcement and Defensive Rights: A person is liable even if they are an innocent aggressor, in imminent threat, or a bystander. Individual consumers may not have intent to harm others.
• Enforcement and Collective Goods: Citizens on the unjust side of the war can still bear responsibility. In climate change, the unjust side benefits from unproductive resources.

Enforceable Duties
Individuals contribute to climate change, climate change poses a serious threat, and therefore individuals are liable to consequences. Theories for the justification of enforcement include:

• Enforcement and Wrongful Harm: A person is liable to be interfered with if he presents a lethal or serious threat. There are varying degrees of responses or consequences for different threats. Driving a car is less serious to murder but is still liable to consequences.
• Enforcement and Defensive Rights: A person is liable even if they are an innocent aggressor, in imminent threat, or a bystander. Individual consumers may not have intent to harm others.
• Enforcement and Collective Goods: Citizens on the unjust side of the war can still bear responsibility. In climate change, the unjust side benefits from unproductive resources.

What to do
1. People can make ethical choices. Principles of social justice and ecological citizenship prove that there are inherent internal drivers to do the right thing and they can be expressed through purchasing choices.
2. There are deep psychological roots behind consumerism and why people make the choices they do. Having too many options leads to a values-actions gap between what the consumer thinks he cares about versus what he shows he cares about through his purchases. Branding of products is a powerful strategy to sway purchasing decisions.
3. A reversal test can demonstrate people's status quo bias, proving that eliminating climate change would be better than the opposite of reverting to pre-Industrial status.

Housing, Food, Transportation, and Plastic

Housing Facts
• Households waste an annual 3,460,000 tons of tissues and paper towels, 6,550,000 tons of paper and cardboard products
• Householder water use can add up to 50 gallons of water per person per day, which is 6,000 gallons of water per month in a 4-person household
• Housing industry accounts for 21% of total US energy use

Food Facts
• California's food import carbon footprint was 70,000 tons of CO2 in 2005
• Food processing uses 9% of U.S. energy
• It takes 240 gallons of water to make a loaf of bread, and 1,800 gallons of water to make one pound of beef

Transportation Facts
• Of the transportation sector's greenhouse gas emissions, cars account for 60%, trucks 23%, and planes 8%
• Cars can emit 24 pounds of carbon dioxide for every gallon of gas
• In the U.S. there are 239.8 million cars
• 1.7 billion tons of greenhouse gases are released into the atmosphere from highway vehicles alone

Plastics Facts
• There are more than 1 trillion plastic bags used every year worldwide
• 32 million tons of plastic waste is generated each year
• Plastic bags take up to 500 years to biodegrade
• It is estimated that 46,000 pieces of harmful plastic exist in each square mile of ocean

Individual Choice and Climate Change
Individuals, particularly in affluent countries, are responsible for contributing to the harms of climate change. When it comes to making ethical choices regarding the environment, individuals often fall into Parfit's Five Mistakes of Moral Mathematics. Most commonly, individuals will underestimate how much their contribution means in the long-term effects of climate change.

Plastics, Tows, and Food
• 32 million tons of plastic waste generated each year. Banning certain types of plastics altogether would decrease energy use to create plastics; would decrease waste, and would decrease harmful chemicals created by these plastics.
• Implementing significant tax increases on certain products, following Denmark's 150% tax on non-renewable vehicles, would decrease purchasing incentives for these products. Equally as significant tax decreases for individual behaviors such as alternative home energy systems would increase purchasing incentives for these climate-positive products and behaviors.
• Restricting red meat production or enforcing alternative energy in the production of high-energy foods would cut our energy use while promoting healthier lifestyles.

Democracy
• Democracy is founded on increasing the well-being of all it can possibly affect.
• Democracy has the legitimacy to embody the global population as its constituents and make decisions that will benefit collective well-being in the long term.

Strategies For Enforcement
• Leadership must be task-oriented and justified to use Tessor Management strategies to gain support for immediate and urgent climate change policies.
• Leaders are justified to become “choice architects” and dictate or shape the availability or incentive of certain products.
• Leaders must shape the policies, but it will be the actions of the individual consumers that makes a difference.