

Research Brief

Understanding the nature of our responsibility in relation to climate change presents a significant challenge. The question of individual, backward-looking responsibility has tended to take a back seat in these discussions, either given secondary importance to the responsibility of institutional actors, or actively opposed, as conceptually misguided. From the perspective of an individualistic rational choice theory, it can be argued that a particular emission-causing act does not make a difference to harms, and therefore that given such acts produce immediate benefits, we ought to perform them. According to this pattern of reasoning, individuals do nothing wrong, and it would therefore be senseless to hold them responsible – liable – for their acts. Yet it is exactly such acts which, in aggregate, have precipitated the global climate crisis.

One proposed solution to this apparent paradox has been to argue that individuals *do* in fact make a difference that could be registered in practical reasoning. Although this remains an active area of research, its prospects do not appear promising. Far more attractive are approaches which invoke the idea of collective responsibility, a notable example being Iris Marion Young in her posthumously published *Responsibility for Justice* (2011). Yet the application of such accounts to climate change is not straightforward. Several theorists recommend we abandon our traditional framework of individual liability for damages, for one according to which individuals are responsible for participation rather than causing harm, but on which these responsibilities are merely forward-looking – obligations to combat climate change so far as is in our power, especially by form *institutions* capable of doing so. There is a compelling public-policy case for moving away from a liability model: the apportionment of blame to individuals would appear arbitrary, which would act as a disincentive to effective action.

Yet liability as a framework for responsibility has an important strength: it provides *specific* obligations, namely the restoration of loss and damage. The nature of *positive* obligations engendered by participation in collective harm, meanwhile, remain either mysterious or *ad hoc*. What is needed is a model of collective responsibility that can accommodate useful features of individual liability. Armed with such an account, we will be able to build a description of the differentiated responsibilities of large-scale economic actors, states, and supranational institutions from the ground up.