

MOTIVATING COLLECTIVE ACTION IN RESPONSE  
TO AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT:  
CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY IN A CLIMATE-CHANGING WORLD

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Environmental Studies Program  
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2019

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Motivating Collective Action in Response to an Existential Threat: Critical Phenomenology in a Climate-Changing World

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

Environmental Studies Program

March 2019

Title: Motivating Collective Action in Response to an Existential Threat: Critical Phenomenology in a Climate-Changing World

In this dissertation, I analyze climate change as a collective action problem. Decades of consistent policy and indeed institutional failure suggest that climate change cannot be managed top-down by experts and politicians alone. Climate communicators must therefore take up the challenge of ethically and politically motivating public action on this issue. Unfortunately, the ethical and political logic of climate response presents profound challenges to public motivation that appears to confound thinkers in the climate literature across disciplines. I thus endeavor to rethink the climate situation today from the perspective of collective motivation. Doing justice to the complexities of this multifaceted problematic demands interdisciplinary analysis, but the equally pressing need for general comprehension requires philosophical synthesis. For the climate issue is at once global and intergenerational in scale, and is systemic to modern social and cultural institutions that have long-evolved to structure the way people relate to each other, to nature, and ultimately to the world of everyday experience. My thesis, then, is that this collective action problem is ultimately an existential problem that calls for an existential response. Specifically, I argue that the ethical and political implications of climate

response are largely received as an “existential threat” to the extent that they unsettle the integrity of everyday existence lived in common. That is, the deeper implications of this issue roundly contradict the background structures of “lifeworld identity” informing collective experience at some of the most general (socio-cultural) levels of being in the world. The consequences of this existential problem present us with two “quandaries” that must be addressed coherently. The “quandary of denial” signifies the largely ethical challenges of motivating a collective response to the historical and material realities of the climate ‘problem.’ The “quandary of transition,” by contrast, speaks to the relatively political challenges of relating the climate problem as such to climate ‘solutions’ that are collectively meaningful enough to positively inspire viable ways forward. Finally, I conclude by drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty to advance a critical phenomenology of public motivation responsive to these two moments of the existential problem.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

How should we respond to climate change? This is at once the most pressing question one could ask today and the most difficult to answer. On the one hand, we must come to terms with what climate change is, think about what it ultimately entails, and grapple with the sheer gravity of the situation we are in. The science suggests that a destabilizing climate threatens civilization as we know it, and perhaps human survival. The gravity of this crisis, however, isn't fully felt until one turns to the question of response. It's one thing to imagine the myriad technologies and policies that could be rationally implemented to mitigate and adapt to climate change. However, once reflection turns from *how* to theoretically solve this problem to *why* decades of effort have failed in concrete practice, we begin to recognize just how monumentally challenging the crisis really is.

Centering on the question of response, this dissertation endeavors to rethink the climate situation today as a collective action problem. Specifically, I argue that adequately responding to climate change requires ethical and political action at a grassroots level in the face of institutional failure, but the unique characteristics of the climate issue present enormous barriers to motivation. Analyzing these barriers to collective action from an existential perspective, I ultimately advance an ethico-political ontology of collective motivation sensitive to the basic challenges of overcoming them in practice.

Perhaps the best way to begin thinking about the situation we find ourselves in is to consider the disjunction between scientific awareness of climate change as a material

threat and the political failures to appropriately respond to this. Today, diverse lines of evidence for anthropogenic climate change—in the form of yearly temperature records and satellite data, computer modeling, ice core samples, tree rings, pollen analysis, species migration patterns, accelerating rates of glacier and arctic sea ice loss, and historical and archeological findings—all converge with impressive consistency. The discord between the science and politics of climate change, however, is striking. Already in 1965, U.S. president Lyndon Johnson (n.d.) delivered a special message to congress warning of industrial activities that have “altered the composition of the atmosphere on a global scale through...a steady increase in carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels.” But the appearance of climate change as a public and international issue really emerges in the 1980s. Generally speaking, the U.S. public has been aware of this issue for more than a quarter-century now, particularly since climate scientist James Hansen testified before congress in 1988 on the evidence for the dangers of climate change with sensational media attention. That same year, the United Nations established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to provide governments with the latest scientific knowledge of climate change, together with reports on potential impacts and risks as well as recommendations for mitigation and adaptation. In 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) established the groundwork for the Conference of the Parties (COP), which has gathered nations across the globe to meet every year since 1995 to coordinate an international response.

Despite these considerable efforts, however, the politics of climate change is widely seen as an unmitigated failure. Ever since Hansen testified, the first IPCC report was issued, and the first COP undertaken, the scientific evidence for—and consensus

on—anthropogenic climate change has solidified to a remarkable degree. At the same time, warnings of risk in the face of inaction have grown increasingly explicit and grave, and thus calls for aggressive mitigation and adaption measures have taken an exceedingly urgent tone. By and large, however, global emissions over the past two decades haven't decreased or even leveled off but have increased.<sup>1</sup> Concluding their general study of the political challenges of climate change, John Dryzek *et al.* (Dryzek, Norgaard, and Schlosberg 2013, 12) write: “In short, it seems that everything that could possibly go wrong has gone wrong. The result is that the increasing urgency of calls for action is accompanied by diminished likelihood of substantial response, especially at the crucial global level.” Dale Jamieson, more pointedly, has declared the dream of an international response dead. How is one to understand this historic failure and what general lessons are to be drawn from this experience?

The consistency of policy failure suggests that the challenges of climate response are institutional in nature. This institutional failure finds expression in the technocratic approaches to climate change still dominant today.<sup>2</sup> From the very beginning, the various facets of the climate problem have been defined technocratically by specialists working within their respective institutions, and political responses to it have been administered accordingly. Scientists identify the material nature of the problem, engineers create green

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception to this ascending trajectory occurred in the period from 2014 to 2016 where global emissions almost leveled off, only to pick up again in 2017 by 1.6% and 2.7% in 2018, according to research by the Global Carbon Project launched at the COP 24 meeting at Katowice, Poland in 2018. This research estimates that global carbon emissions in 2018 will reach an all-time record of 37.1bn tonnes (Carrington 2018; Harvey 2017).

<sup>2</sup> By “technocratic,” I generally refer to a top-down governing approach to solving social problems predominantly centered on the administration of highly specialized experts like scientists, engineers, etc. and managers like policy-makers.

technologies to mitigate it, economists calculate costs and benefits to channel market forces, non-governmental organizations lobby politicians who, in turn, negotiate competing interest, and policy makers are charged with legislating the process to ensure success in practice. With respect to international efforts, for instance, recall that the UN created the IPCC to establish scientific authority on the problem; instituted the UNFCCC to coordinate an international response; and passed the Kyoto Protocol to impose legally binding emissions targets for responsible nations. Within this technocratic framework, each nation was then expected to enact rational policies accordingly. Yet, after decades of experience, it has become increasingly evident that the climate issue is far too multifaceted in complexity and comprehensive in scope to be administered technocratically. To the extent that technocratic success depends on the institutional infrastructure administering the process, (infrastructure that is itself implicated and indeed invested in the causes of climate change), decades of immaterial effort across multiple scales suggest institutional failure in a very broad sense.

Specifically, I argue that the climate problem is systemic to the social and cultural institutions structuring the industrialized nations most responsible for it. Although social and cultural institutions cannot be understood independently of one another, productively addressing the systemic roots of climate change requires making this analytic distinction. By “social” institutions, I mean the general structures of co-existence regulating collective behavior in practice. Climate change, for example, is systemic to capitalism as a social institution (Foster, Clark, and York 2010). In conjunction with other institutions concerning government, jurisprudence, education, family, and so on, capitalist economies structure social relations (via class, gender, race, nationality) and socio-ecological

relations<sup>3</sup> to maximize material production and consumption and consolidate wealth and power. “Cultural” institutions, by contrast, constitute the shared structures of meaning—concepts, values, sensibilities, and ultimately what some call a “worldview”—that put coexistence into perspective, largely as a kind of ontological order and historical project. For example, in order to regulate social and socio-ecological relations in practice, industrialized societies require cultural support to make sense of, and normalize, capitalism (especially via consumerism) as a way of life “naturally” destined to realize a higher good. This cultural support includes basic assumptions about human nature as egocentric, acquisitive, competitive, and uniquely rational, together with assumptions about the natural world as a stockpile of resources created for human consumption. These assumptions and others, moreover, find lived expression in widespread valuations of science, technology, and economic growth as avenues of social “development” or historical “progress,” on the one hand, and as powerful problem-solving tools, on the other. Sedimented deep in the background of co-existence, ontological and ethical structures of meaning like these have converged since the Industrial Revolution to make sense of capitalism as a project legitimizing the world order of social and socio-ecological hierarchies driving climate change. Hence, in this socio-cultural context, technocratic solutions to climate change make practical sense.

By institutions, however, I don’t just mean established norms in the form of practical social routines and cultural assumptions, but also the structures of socio-cultural

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<sup>3</sup> By “socio-ecological” relations, I refer to the way societies are structured to interface with the material world of non-human nature. Karl Marx employed the term “metabolism” to describe this (largely economic) relation to nature, and this term has been adopted by Ecological Marxists beginning with John Bellamy Foster (2000).

existence that serve as conduits of power. The significance of institutionalized power with respect to the systemic roots of climate policy failure can be gleaned by considering the role played by the mainstream climate movement charged with creating the political will for climate policy. It is significant that, from its very beginning, the climate movement has become increasingly professionalized. Situated in close relation to the centers of institutionalized power, many organizations entrusted to confront the climate problem have generally operated under the assumption that real political change has to be achieved “pragmatically.” Unlike the environmental movement that took shape in the 1960s and 70s that centered on grassroots organizing for systemic change, subsequent generations have largely focused on working *with*, not against, the powerful stakeholders most responsible for the climate problem under the banner of pragmatic realism.<sup>4</sup> As critics argue (discussed below), the guiding thread of climate pragmatism is that the system can be made to work for the climate in piecemeal fashion. Yet, after decades of effort, it can be said that the consequences of this optimistic experiment are now in. Not only has the movement failed to create the political will to confront the climate problem

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<sup>4</sup> Importantly, however, there have been significant exceptions to this general tendency, particularly over the past decade (roughly since 2007 or 2008). I certainly don’t want to give the sweeping impression that everybody is complacently sitting on their hands. In the Anglophone world, direct action grassroots movements have emerged like the climate camps, carbon action groups (CAGs), carbon reduction action groups (CRAGs), and others (largely under the banner of climate justice). In the United States, movements against oil pipelines like Keystone XL and Dakota Access have emerged with considerable public support and some meaningful victories. As Naomi Klein (2014) discusses in her book *This Changes Everything*, moreover, there is indeed a worldwide movement of radical activists (that she christens “Blockadia”) resisting the fossil fuel industry and the state governments that support them, and some are explicitly committed to systemic change (“System Change Not Climate Change” has become a popular slogan in the climate justice movement). Despite inspiring tendencies, however, these notable efforts remain on the margins of climate politics compared to their pragmatic counterparts (or compared to the environmental movement in the 1960s and ‘70s). But even more significantly, in my view, radical climate action at the moment (and in the foreseeable future, I fear) still doesn’t appear remotely commensurate with the scale and depths of this systemic problem. Much more work is needed to build diverse coalitions, focus public attention on root causes while inspiring positive alternatives to industrial modernity, and ultimately put existing regimes on the defensive.

for what it is, but in many cases this cooperative approach has been coopted to either water down or thwart climate policy. With each corporate or state partnership, those most responsible for the climate problem could legitimize false solutions by pointing to the support of their environmentalist partners, thus salving the public conscience with assurances that progress is being achieved. An example of this, discussed in the second chapter, would be the widespread support that environmental groups have provided for market-based measures like cap-and-trade as a politically feasible response to climate change. Despite acquiring significant political traction, however, such efforts have consistently failed to either pass (like the 2009 U.S. Waxman-Markey Bill) or if passed to significantly mitigate emissions (e.g., the European Union Emissions Trading System).

Although technocratic and pragmatic approaches to climate change seem to be the most politically feasible in the face of a problem calling for expediency, they miss how deeply systemic the climate problem is by jumping too quickly to solutions. Generally put, “solutions” that work comfortably for regimes of power under industrial capitalism do not work for the climate itself precisely because the socio-cultural institutions supporting the former are in fact systemic to the latter. Whether one considers cap-and-trade policies, the Kyoto Protocol, or the Paris Accord, when judged against the historical and material demands of the climate problem, these politically “realistic” approaches are, in fact, unrealistic.

Once the conspicuous disjunction between the science and politics of climate change is put into perspective, climate technocracy and pragmatism should fade as viable avenues of response. Given the systemic nature of climate change constantly washing over each “solution,” I submit that pathways forward have to be carefully redefined and

reoriented in renewed contact with the problem. Put otherwise, a *truly* solution-driven approach ready for material progress must first find its compass in a problem-driven stance steadfastly committed to confronting the sweeping social and cultural implications of this historic issue.<sup>5</sup>

In the first instance, then, I agree with climate ethicists arguing that a problem-driven approach to climate change must in large part be *ethically* motivated in response to institutional failure. Strategic, pragmatic approaches—whether politically motivated to avoid conflict, keep existing power relations and comfort levels safely intact, advance careers, protect cherished assumptions about the good life and the good society, and ultimately maintain the status quo—have to give way to collective actions committed to a higher good. Responding to the climate problem for what it is begins with doing the right thing *despite* institutional pressures and incentives not to.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, I agree with growing tendencies in this literature and beyond it to frame climate change as a collective action problem, broadly conceived as a viable alternative to technocratic and pragmatic framings. The problem of collective action is typically understood to arise from an essential conflict of motives between individual and group interests. For instance, it would be in each nation’s interest to work collectively with others around the globe to address the common threat of climate change, but the unique characteristics of the climate issue present enormous barriers to appropriately

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<sup>5</sup> However, as I argue more fully in chapter four, “problem-driven” and “solution-driven” approaches have to find mutual confirmation so that, in the final analysis, neither stance is normatively privileged (reductively).

<sup>6</sup> The same point made in footnote 5 above applies to “ethical” and “political” motives (also analyzed in chapter four), where I largely associate the ethical with “problem-driven” approaches and the political with “solution-driven” orientations.

motivating this (Gardiner 2010). The general logic of climate change complicating collective action, however, doesn't exactly boil down to a conflict of interests. The deeper conflict is between the *demands* for collective action imposed by the climate problem, on the one hand, and the ability of existing *institutions* to facilitate such action, on the other.

For these reasons and others, then, adequately responding to climate change requires collective action oriented by a common purpose solidly grounded in the climate problem.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty concerns the lack of institutional infrastructure needed to find common ground and orient such a response. Yet, not only is there a dearth of institutions to facilitate common ways of making sense of this issue and acting accordingly, existing institutions *positively* motivate ways of thinking and behaving that are intrinsic to the climate problem to begin with. Somehow, ethical motives need to emerge that are powerful enough to find and create a truly problem-driven response to systemic climate change despite the social, cultural, and political forces neutralizing and discouraging this. Ultimately, I argue that mass climate movements for systemic transition have to emerge largely at the grassroots level by citizens committed to taking ethical responsibility for the global future.

Unfortunately, the systemic barriers to a problem-driven response to climate change put public concerns for this issue dramatically out of step with the gravity of the crisis. Indeed, concern has generally *declined* in the face of stronger scientific evidence.

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<sup>7</sup> As I shall argue, however, the need for a “common purpose” to motivate climate action cannot be strictly “problem-driven.” Overcoming (or ethically transcending) the climate problem also requires “solution-driven” motives to meaningfully orient this common purpose moving forward. The difference between the solution-driven politics of climate pragmatism that I criticize and the solution-driven politics of collective action that I ultimately call for is precisely that the latter (unlike the former) is far more responsive to—or brought into closer relation with—the problem.

The crux of the problem of inaction thus takes the form of a “paradox.” Kari Marie Norgaard (2011, 2) notes this “paradoxical phenomenon” and cites various studies to confirm it. “For example, Paul Kellstedt, Sammy Zahran, and Arnold Vedlitz have found that increased levels of information about global warming have a negative effect on concern and sense of personal responsibility. In particular, respondents who are better informed about climate change feel less rather than more responsible for it” (Norgaard 2011, 2).

The systemic barriers to collectivizing a problem-driven response to this issue thus confront us with what I call the *ethical quandary of denial*. Putting a finer point on the question of collective action, I contend that grassroots movements must ultimately emerge with enough political momentum to overcome the systemic forces resisting a problem-driven response to climate change, yet the ethical motivation needed to take collective responsibility for this issue tends to shrink, not grow, in light of the problem. How is one to understand and address this “paradoxical” denial of responsibility? I argue that an existential phenomenology of the collective action problem is uniquely suited to help us make comprehensive sense of this phenomenon. In contrast to micro-level psychological accounts that focus on the individual (Peeters, et al. 2015; Cripps 2013; Hiller 2011; Galvin and Harris 2014) and macro-level structural analyses focused on institutions (Gardiner 2011; Jamieson 2014), my efforts to grapple with the problem of collective action direct attention to the lived conditions that motivate *how collectives make sense of and respond to climate change*. Most importantly, my formulation of the barriers to collective action is intended to suggest pathways for overcoming them.

Offering an existential phenomenology of climate denial, I begin with the thesis that what is most significantly “denied” in many cases isn’t necessarily the reality or even the seriousness of climate change, but first and foremost the ethical implications of this issue calling for a genuine response. It is precisely this call that, if honestly attended, confronts one with an overwhelming truth. Climate change is a deeply systemic problem that neither policies nor individual forms of responsibility alone can address. The deeper implications of the climate problem don’t just threaten *personal* dreams, sensibilities, and practical routines. They threaten the “world” of collective experience—or what Edmund Husserl called the lifeworld. The most fundamental institutions of industrialized existence defining the modern era not only motivate the everydayness of climate change but also secure collective forms of identity. In this sense, climate change is ultimately received in one form or another as an existential threat to lifeworld identity.<sup>8</sup>

Husserl’s concept of the lifeworld captures in rich philosophical detail the socio-cultural background of intersubjective existence and identity. A lifeworld approach to the collective action problem promises an account of the ways in which—and degrees to which—key institutions are intersubjectively embodied by various communities or demographics at the public level (in ways both shared and differentiated). In the first instance, the lifeworld denotes the “pre-given” world that people experience in common to the extent that they have a shared history and material context of “living together” (Husserl 1970, 108). It is because of the socio-cultural background of lifeworld experience that things appear immediately obvious or intuitively self-evident to

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<sup>8</sup> As I make clear throughout the dissertation, however, I do not hold that this “existential threat” is felt uniformly, irrespective of socio-cultural differences, as if some monolithic “lifeworld identity” were common to all people.

“everyone,” as opposed to merely being the products of personal reflection or interpretation (which can sometimes come off as “contrived” when norms are breached). The self-evidence of everyday life is what enables subjects to live and communicate together in a world of real things, but things that are normatively contextualized according to the socio-cultural institutions affording common meaning to existence.

To the extent that lifeworld identity is fundamentally implicated in the same world order of production and consumption responsible for climate change, asking for ethical changes that conflict with that world order risks flirting with a profound identity crisis that one is strongly motivated to avoid. The anxieties portending such a crisis can quickly shut down ethical reflection before it begins. In my view, Martin Heidegger’s existential analysis of anxiety suggests pathways for understanding and confronting the “climate anxieties” inhibiting a problem-driven response to climate change. Learning to work through anxieties motivating ethical denial in the face of this existential threat, however, is a necessary but insufficient condition for collective action. This becomes clear as one shifts attention from the existential barriers to ethical responsibility to the relatively political problem of overcoming them. Even for those with the wherewithal to work through denial for the sake of getting to a point of action, there are still barriers to *translating* the climate problem into perceivable “solutions.” Here, however, I don’t speak of the “solutions” defined by climate pragmatists looking for agreeable political traction with the dominant structures of power. Rather, I refer to *existential* “solutions” that find *ethico-political traction in the problem* of climate change.

Hence, in addition to the ethical quandary of climate denial, the challenges of motivating collective action also involve what I’m inclined to call the *political quandary*

*of transition*. If the ethical quandary of denial centers on the difficulties of honestly confronting and processing the problem of climate change, the political quandary of transition draws attention to the challenge of *taking up* this problem in light of compelling solutions on the horizon. If climate change is indeed as deeply systemic to existing socio-cultural institutions as I contend, questions about what *follows* industrial modernity<sup>9</sup>—and how to achieve this alternative future in practice—are inescapable. And yet, the political bridge between climate change as a systemic problem and viable solutions to it is far more difficult to traverse than it first appears. Motivation to act collectively suffers from the conceptual, affective, and practical challenges of translating problem-driven ethical motives for systemic change into solution-driven political visions of systemic change moving forward.

In this sense, the political quandary of transition leaves one stranded in a sort of abyss between problem-driven motives for ethical responsibility and solution-driven motives for political involvement that can only exacerbate existing anxieties about the climate. This condition either leaves people lost in the abyss between problem and solution, or else compels them to find relief on the solid ground of one side or the other. Arguably, such relief finds widespread expression in public and academic discourses as a tendency to either center attention on the problem of climate change or focus instead on solutions. If the problem narrative presents climate change as an external threat that ethically demands immediate and decisive action, the solution narrative usually asks for

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<sup>9</sup> Competing visions of the socio-ecological future include “ecological modernization” (Mol 2001; Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2007) and “natural capitalism” (Hawken, Lovins, and Lovins 1999); agrarianism (Shiva 2008; Berry 2015); “green” or “anarcho-” primitivism (Derrick Jensen 2006a, 2006b); and Eco-socialism (Foster and Burkett 2017; Kovel 2007), and green anarcho-socialism (Bookchin 1982).

politically manageable, nonthreatening adjustments: a transition to green consumerism, carpooling, voting for enlightened politicians, or at its zenith a lifestyle politics that affirms post-materialist values, voluntary simplicity, do-it-yourself communities, etc.

In the final analysis, however, overcoming the systemic barriers to climate response requires bringing problem-driven and solution-driven motives into productive relation. Political solutions to climate change have to be ethically motivated by the problem, and ethical responsibility requires politically viable avenues of response in the form of meaningful visions worth realizing. In this respect, the ethical quandary of denial and the political quandary of transition are intertwined. Invoking Hegelian language, one could say that these quandaries mark the first and second “moments” (respectively) of a larger problematic that I call the “existential problem.”<sup>10</sup> This larger problematic, which I put forward as an alternative—and more comprehensive—formulation of the collective action problem, brings new meaning to the “paradox of inaction.”

To address the paradoxical logic of the existential problem, I outline an ontology of climate agency informed by the political philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. To a considerable degree, the logic of traditional theory is philosophically geared to *resolve* paradoxes. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, however, would counsel against this approach to problems—especially ones like climate change. Indeed, a Merleau-Pontian response to the systemic difficulties of climate response would explicitly affirm, not resolve, the paradoxical logic of this challenge *precisely in order to work through it*.

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<sup>10</sup> Importantly, these “moments” aren’t necessarily linear or sequential since, as I shall argue, coming to ethical terms with the problem ultimately requires the kind of political traction that comes with meaning solutions.

Consider, to begin with, the way Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 72) distinguishes “the new philosophy” of existentialism (meant to describe his approach) from the philosophical tradition:

The question is that of man’s relationship to his natural or social surroundings. There are two classical views: one treats man as the result of the physical, physiological, and sociological influences which shape him from the outside and make him one thing among many; the other consists of recognizing an a-cosmic freedom in him, insofar as he is spirit and represents to himself the very causes which supposedly act upon him. On the one hand, man is part of the world; on the other, he is the constituting consciousness of the world. Neither view is satisfactory...The merit of the new philosophy is precisely that it tries, in the notion of existence, to find a way of thinking about our condition.

Importantly, Merleau-Ponty’s existentialism is critical of traditional philosophical models that begin with a cognitive subject that either constitutes the objective world from within or is constituted by it from without. Existence, he contends in the following passage, is far more “ambiguous” than the philosophical twins of classical thought can admit.

“[E]xistence” is the movement through which man is in the world and involves himself in a physical and social situation which then becomes his point of view on the world. All involvement is ambiguous because it both affirms and restricts freedom...My involvement in nature and history is likewise a limitation of my view on the world and yet the only way for me to approach the world, know it, and do something in it. The relationship between subject and object is no longer that relationship of knowing...wherein the object always seems the construction of the subject, but a relationship of being in which, paradoxically, the subject is his body, his world, and his situation, by a sort of exchange. (Ibid)

I take two points from these passages with regards to the climate situation. First, existing theoretical approaches to such a problem run up against the limits of the “classical view” of Western thought to the extent that they tacitly assume something like a “relationship of knowing.” Whether knowledge is understood objectively or subjectively—e.g., as rational or psychological in nature, social or cultural in context—the ancient assumption common to each position is that cognition—i.e., *knowledge* of climate change—translates

into action. It is from this underlying perspective, I submit, that inaction on climate change seems so paradoxical in the face of growing scientific evidence and public awareness. Knowledge is by no means irrelevant to action, but cognition and behavior are secondary expressions of one's situated involvements in the world—that fundamentally ambiguous “relationship of being” constituting lifeworld identity “in which, paradoxically, the subject is his body, his world, and his situation, by a sort of exchange.” This broad notion of “exchange” is particularly significant to Merleau-Ponty's philosophical logic of paradox, and central to my efforts to grapple with the paradoxes of inaction in the face of climate change.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, the traditional logic of knowledge relations that still informs theories of human motivation today is essentially dualistic. With only two terms to work with (subject vs. object, cultural vs. social institutions, theory vs. practice, problem vs. solution, etc.), the logic of classical thought must ultimately choose, or normatively prioritize, one pole over its opposite in order to drive out ambiguity and achieve consistency. Dialectical thought going back to Hegel and Marx, by contrast, softens these categories and attempts to conceive one in terms of the other according to the dynamic relations between them. In this respect, an essential difference between relations of “knowledge” and those of “being” is that the latter is thickly mediated by a *third* term. For Merleau-Ponty, this “third genre of being” includes the perceptual body at the

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<sup>11</sup> Importantly, one should be cognizant of the risks of *overemphasizing* paradox and ambiguity (or contingency, irony, absurdity, and other concepts with a family resemblance to these). Particularly in political contexts, an undue embrace of ambiguity as an expression of virtue or as an intrinsic value is self-defeating. The point of emphasizing the paradoxical logic of existence is always to “prepare the ground,” so to speak, for new beginnings (and ultimately agency) by working through problematic assumptions, emotions, routines, and—in the climate case in particular—the institutions make these “self-evident.”

individual level and intersubjectively-embodied institutions at the collective level. This third term is what mediates the various “exchanges” of existence.

Reconsidering the paradoxes of inaction dialectically from this “third” perspective, then, enables me to examine just how deeply the systemic logic of this issue complicates the lifeworld exchanges between knowledge *of* climate change and ethico-political responses *to* it. Reconceiving the full scope of the collective action problem as an existential problem thus requires an alternative philosophy that begins with what it is to *respond* to situations—ranging from the concrete contingencies embodied in personal experience to the historical contingencies embodied in socio-cultural experience. An essential task here is to put forward a logic of lifeworld existence that circumvents irreconcilable debates between problem-driven and solution-driven approaches to motivating public action precisely by focusing on the paradoxical relations intertwining them. More generally still, the larger project driving the dissertation is to help prepare the ground, so to speak, for collective action—that is, for an ethico-political response to the totalizing implications of the climate situation. Overcoming the socio-cultural barriers to grassroots action on a mass scale requires a lifeworld transition to bring problem-driven and solution-driven motives for systemic change into productive relation.

To this end, the dissertation is structured to move between the ethical and political challenges of climate response broadly conceived as a collective action problem and find resolution in an existentialist and critical philosophy of collective motivation appropriate to these challenges. Chapters two and three speak to the ethical quandary of denial mentioned above, which concerns the challenges of ethically motivating a problem-driven response to systemic climate change. The second chapter offers a structural

analysis of these challenges, and the third offers an existential phenomenology of the ethical quandary of denial. The fourth and fifth chapters, by contrast, focus on the second moment of the existential problem that I refer to as the political quandary of transition, where questions of climate agency start coming into view. Here, I turn to the challenge of transitioning from a problem-driven stance of ethical responsibility to a solution-driven stance political intentionality. The fourth chapter examines debates in the climate literature that exemplify the existential abyss between problem-driven and solution-driven approaches to systemic climate change. The fifth chapter, finally, advances a critical phenomenology of climate response sensitive to this existential condition.

Within this general framework, the second chapter offers an overview of climate change as a collective action problem across three structural vectors of collective motivation. Namely, I examine structures of political power, cultural sensibility, and social behavior as institutional barriers to collectively responding to climate change as a systemic problem. Along these lines, I maintain that viable responses to the climate problem are virtually impossible to the extent that they are uncritically positioned by hegemonic structures of power, traditional common-sense norms, and the dominant structures of practical decision-making (particularly economic and political structures). On these grounds, I argue that ethical motivation is required to overcome the structural barriers to a problem-driven response across these domains.

The argument for an ethically motivated approach to the climate problem begins with an analysis of the political failures to confront this issue technocratically and pragmatically. Considering the institutions situating these dominant approaches, I argue that climate technocrats and pragmatists are tacitly motivated to overlook the systemic

depths of the climate problem in favor of politically-acceptable “solutions” that ultimately safeguard existing structures of power. Hence, the first imperative of climate response, I propose, is to affect a shift from the “solution-driven” politics of climate response that have consistently failed from the start to a “problem-driven” approach that is ethically motivated to confront this systemic issue for what it is.<sup>12</sup> From this standpoint, I evaluate arguments put forward by Chris Cuomo, Dale Jamieson, and Stephen Gardiner as a means of fruitfully distinguishing and analyzing the political, cultural, and social conditions (respectively) complicating an ethical shift of this kind.

To the extent that one can trace the top-down political failures of climate technocracy and pragmatism to the centers of systemic power in the industrialized world, Cuomo offers an argument responsive to this problem. Sensitive to structural differences in power relations, she recognizes that the corporate and state actors bearing most responsibility for climate change are also the least motivated to seriously confront it. As powerful stakeholders, they have the most to lose. From this perspective, she argues that a viable response to the climate problem has to be ethically motivated and politically oriented from the bottom up. That is, citizens are needed that care deeply enough about the implications of climate change to organize grassroots climate movements committed to holding powerful stakeholders accountable. Although citizens do not, in Cuomo’s

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<sup>12</sup> To reiterate, I do not conclude that climate action must ultimately prioritize problem-driven ethical motives over solution-driven political motives. I focus on the political imperatives for solution-driven motivation in chapters four and five. The point of analyzing the “political” vector in chapter two (in conjunction with the cultural and social) is to elucidate the significance of institutionalized power structures as an essential part of the climate problem. In the final analysis, however, overcoming this dimension of the problem (along with the other two) not only requires the ethical motivation to confront the problem but *also* the solution-driven political actions required to carry this confrontation through in practice.

words, *bear* primary responsibility for climate change, the political logic of this systemic problem calls on them to *take* ethical responsibility for it.

In my view, Cuomo's basic position that ethical motivation has to be politically oriented from the bottom up is compelling. However (as I address more fully in chapter three), public citizens in the industrialized world driving climate change do *not* appear sufficiently motivated to take responsibility for this systemic problem, and Cuomo doesn't confront this problem. Hence, having identified the political locus of ethical motivation at the grassroots level, I turn next to Dale Jamieson and Stephen Gardiner's analyses to investigate the cultural and social conditions inhibiting a problem-driven response.

Jamieson, in my view, argues that the barriers to ethical action are predominantly cultural in nature. Generally speaking, Americans and other Westerners are not culturally prepared to *make sense* of the ethical implications of this global and intergenerational issue, and for this reason are not motivated to respond to this problem for what it is. Accordingly, Jamieson's cultural diagnosis of the problem leads him to prescribe cultural solutions to it in the form of an ethical paradigm shift in worldview. Gardiner, by contrast, argues that the primary reasons for inaction are more social than cultural in significance. Most people, he contends, are in fact capable of recognizing the ethical dimensions of climate change. But to the extent that the economic and political institutions motivating social behaviors are heavily geared to perpetuate rather than address climate change, concerns about this problem often buckle when practical decisions are being made on the ground. Gardiner's social diagnosis prompts him to

advance a social contract to create the practical space needed to make ethical decisions on climate change.

Cuomo, Jamieson, and Gardiner's arguments are valuable to the extent that they bring out the political, cultural, and social vectors (respectively) essential to fully motivating ethical action in the face of this deeply systemic problem. Even so, I submit that each position falls short of capturing the full scope of the task at hand by neglecting to the significance of the other two. Cuomo's political argument for grassroots responsibility, for instance, doesn't confront the cultural and social barriers to motivating this kind of ethical responsibility. Jamieson's cultural formulation, moreover, undertheorizes the significance of political power and social structures of practical behavior reinforcing common sense norms and values. And Gardiner's social analysis, finally, tends to sideline questions of systemic power relations and the normative cultural sensibilities brought to every practical decision. After cross-examining each position, therefore, I conclude the chapter with a call for cross-pollination—and ultimately, for a more comprehensive philosophical approach. Greater philosophical synthesis is needed to effectively handle the political, cultural, and social vectors of this seemingly intractable collective action problem. More fundamentally still, I suggest that coming to terms with the totalizing implications of systemic climate change demands a better grasp of the relation between institutions and motivation across these three structural domains of intersubjective experience.

Considering questions left unanswered in chapter two about *how* ethical motivation emerges collectively in the face of a systemic problem like climate change, I turn next to the lived experience of institutionalized existence. Hence, the third chapter

shifts from a structural analysis of the collective action problem to a lifeworld approach that directs attention to how the institutions implicating the climate problem are intersubjectively embodied and taken up in the contexts of everyday life. This largely takes the form of an existential-phenomenological reading of Kari Marie Norgaard's research on the social psychology of climate denial.

Norgaard's experiential approach to climate denial suggests that many at the public level are emotionally overwhelmed by the ethical and ontological implications of climate change and tend to cope in various forms of cognitive dissonance accordingly. By implication, cultivating and deepening ethical motivation for taking responsibility requires a collective ability to emotionally process the daunting implications of the climate crisis, both cognitively and behaviorally. But this is no easy task. At the deepest level, the implications of climate change tend to threaten moral identity in particular and "ontological security" more generally. Here we revisit the "paradox" of inaction mentioned earlier and are now in a position to advance an existential phenomenology of the collective action problem to complement the structural analyses in chapter two.

To begin with, it's not just the frightening prospects of climate change disclosed by scientific knowledge that discourages concern. For many, I argue, it is the overwhelming ethical and ontological implication that our *socio-cultural way of being in the world* is profoundly responsible for something that could destabilize the basic conditions of human existence (and indeed life itself). In the process of peeling back the social and cultural layers of the climate issue, one is implicitly asked to answer for themselves in the face of a harm ineffable in magnitude. Under these existential conditions, the penalty for allowing oneself to reflect honestly on the ethical implications

of systemic climate change is a creeping anxiety that, if unchecked, can be paralyzing. Climate change calls into question both the cultural assumptions many rely on to make sense of the world and the everyday social routines that regulate and sustain one's practical life in it. On the one hand, it threatens to shatter the continuity of historical existence in the industrialized world by which experience in the present finds meaningful roots in the past and orientation towards a future. It also threatens the structural coherence of material existence by which members of society work together to secure what they need from the natural world to survive and thrive. But most significantly, climate change threatens for many the general matrix of *socio-cultural identity* in the furthest reaches of collective experience where historical and material existence mutually reinforce one another in everyday life (albeit, not homogeneously across power differences). At stake is the dominant historical meaning of social existence comprehensively orienting practical life against a hegemonic cultural background of compatible assumptions (concerning the good life, the good society, history, nature, etc.) in *relation* to the material needs motivating and confirming these cultural assumptions in practice. Hence, to the extent that the totalizing implications of climate change challenge this socio-cultural nexus of collective existence, purely cultural or purely social approaches to motivating collective action ultimately fall flat.

Offering an existential-phenomenological reading of Norgaard's work, I argue that the deeper implications of climate change motivate denial largely to the extent that<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The qualifier "largely to the extent that" in this sentence is worth noting to curb any suspicions that I am assuming an homogenous lifeworld identity universal to all demographics irrespective of socio-cultural differences in intersubjective experience. So to the *extent* that the deeper implications of climate change threaten the dominant structures of lifeworld identity, one is likely to experience this issue as a threat (and thus risk facing greater anxieties, etc.). The implication here, as I discuss more fully in subsequent chapters,

they threaten the dominant socio-cultural matrix constituting lifeworld identity. This collectively-assumed background identity is precisely what affords the ontological security needed to live with some measure of confidence and purpose. The penalty for honestly reflecting on the climate problem is a creeping anxiety that can quickly shut down ethical reflection.

On this reading of the quandary of denial, therefore, questions of ethical motivation/responsibility pivot on finding productive ways of dealing with climate anxiety. For Heidegger, there are two basic ways of dealing with anxiety. The first can be described as ‘reactive.’ Should one lack the capacity to cope with anxiety and work through it, the impulse to react in self-defense will be strong. Here, one reacts to climate change as an internal threat, as opposed to an external problem. By contrast, with sufficient coping skills and social support, ‘responding’ to anxiety becomes a possibility. This requires an ability to authentically accept anxiety for what it is by cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally coming to terms with the problem generating it in the first place. Once achieved, the authentic response isn’t exactly directed inward, as if one’s motive is simply to ward off denial. Rather, the response is projected to the world situating the problem on something like its terms in conjunction with one’s own.

Unlike the reaction, the response expresses a kind of *answer* to a problem that, to some extent, can be handled as a question to be addressed, as opposed to a threat to be avoided. Genuine answers neither misunderstand the problem, repeat it, nor burry it. They *intentionally* take up the problem in question and bring themselves to it by

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is that those demographics tending to identify with these dominant structures are more prone to denial than their relatively marginalized counterparts.

volunteering a response that transcends it in orientation. In this respect and others, therefore, it is not enough to invite people to courageously confront climate anxiety for the sake of becoming steadfastly problem-driven (e.g., as if out of duty). One cannot truly respond to questions with intention unless the possibility of an answer glimmers on the horizon, however vague or indeterminate that glimmer might be at first. Likewise, one cannot authentically respond to problems without a horizon of possible solutions.<sup>14</sup>

Here we ultimately speak of something like an authentic historical response to the socio-cultural and material implications of climate change. But if we take the meaning of responsibility in a literal sense as an “ability to respond” to situations appropriately and consistently, it follows that responsibility implies more than coming to terms with the ethical implications of the climate problem as such. It implies a capacity to respond to the problem with enough purpose to *move forward* with lasting intention and confidence. At this point, we encounter the existential abyss between problem and solution marking the second moment of the collective action problem, the political quandary of transition. Viable grassroots climate movements (and the citizens supporting them) must not only become problem-driven in ethical motivation but also solution-driven in political motivation. In addition to the ethical challenges of overcoming denial, the existential problem of motivating collective action also implicates the essentially political challenges of transition.

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<sup>14</sup> This basic insight is captured in Marx’s (1970, 21) historical materialism when he writes: “Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.”

This point takes us to chapter four. Navigating the existential abyss between problem and solution requires caution to avoid getting stuck on either side. Considering the political quandary of transition, the temptation is strong to escape ambiguity—to either stand with ethical conviction on the solid foundations of climate science or to move more fluidly in the currents of the political world where things get done and progress can be measured. Indeed, it has been noted that, in the world of climate communications, strategies to motivate public action tend to be divided between those that focus on the problem of climate change and those that focus instead on solutions. This bifurcation is echoed in academic debates centering this chapter between what I call “hard medicine realism” and “positive vision culturalism,” where the former is problem-driven on ethical grounds and the latter solution-driven on political grounds.

The hard medicine approach attempts to galvanize public action by conveying the grim scientific reality of climate change as an irreconcilable truth that needs to be swallowed whole for the greater good. Once people snap out of the myopic bubble of their everyday concerns and come to grips with reality itself, they will naturally be motivated to act. There is arguably a rational actor theory of human motivation lurking here that, after years of frustration trying to scientifically educate the public, lends itself to a politics of fear. A growing sensitivity to the affective dimensions of climate denial, however, has led critics of this approach to champion a “positive vision” stance that tends toward cultural theories of motivation. Here, carefully chosen rhetorical frames, metaphors, and “narrative strategies” are needed to mobilize political action. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus (2007, 1), for instance, famously reminded gloom-and-doom environmentalists that Martin Luther King Jr. didn’t inspire the American Civil

Rights movement with an “I have a nightmare” speech. It was the *dream* that inspired change. Owing to the utter failure of environmentalists to inspire a viable response to climate change, they argue for a shift towards a visionary “politics of possibility.”<sup>15</sup> People need to be inspired from within, not cajoled by threats from without.

Despite invaluable kernels of truth on both sides, the logic that gives each position its philosophical consistency is problematic. The problem narrative of hard medicine realism, to begin with, is deeply implicated in the ethical quandaries of climate denial analyzed in chapter three. At best, emphasizing the grave urgency of the climate crisis might initially encourage some people to overcome denial to some degree. But even under favorable circumstances, a problem-driven response will ultimately erode without a bridge to perceivable solutions that are genuinely commensurate with the problem. The solution narrative marking the positive vision approach, by contrast, is intended to circumvent the ethical quandaries of climate denial for the sake of political empowerment by appealing to existing cultural ideals. In so doing, however, it invites another species of denial by glossing over the material realities of the climate problem in the name of visionary solutions. In this case, the political logic of positive vision culturalism suffers the opposite problem of their hard medicine counterparts. Again, advancing solutions to problems not fully felt is like asking people to provide answers to questions they have yet to ask.

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<sup>15</sup> The term “politics of possibility” is in the subtitle of *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*. Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2007, 17) intend the term as an alternative to the “politics of limits” defining mainstream environmentalism, “which seeks to constrain human ambition, aspiration, and power rather than unleash and direct them.”

The ethical quandary of denial and the political quandary of transition are inextricably linked, and this intertwining is precisely what makes this collective action problem paradoxical. One cannot trade the hard realities of climate change for palatable cultural visions, or vice-versa. Meaningful solutions have to be motivated by the problem for what it is *and* responding to the problem meaningfully requires motivating solutions to orient the response. But if being problem-driven and solution-driven necessarily entail one another, how can collective action ever get off the ground? Here, we might speak of a paradox of motivation. This takes us from Husserl and Heidegger to the most politically-oriented figure in this tradition, Merleau-Ponty. In the fifth and final chapter, I draw on his political philosophy to offer a critical phenomenology<sup>16</sup> of the existential—or collective action—problem sensitive to this paradoxical logic of motivation.

There is reason to believe that Merleau-Ponty would affirm the kernels of truth driving the hard medicine and positive vision strategies to motivating climate action, but reject the one-sided logic roundly setting these positions in mutual opposition (and rendering both silent on the problem of transition accordingly). In his own day, he acknowledged and criticized similar tendencies dividing Marxist thought into “Orthodox” and “Western” camps with respect to questions of motivating class consciousness. Despite their virtues, he concluded that the logic of each stance misses “the relation of motivation” essential to politicizing collective action (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 473).

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<sup>16</sup>This term (which was not used by Merleau-Ponty himself) is discussed in the introduction to chapter five, where I loosely distinguish it from the existential phenomenology more characteristic of chapter three. Roughly speaking, my use of this label as political philosophy is meant to suggest a phenomenological approach to motivating ethico-political agency. For the Frankfurt School, “critical theory” arguably centered around the problem of motivating class consciousness (and ultimately political agency). This focal point is preserved in my treatment of Merleau-Ponty’s political philosophy, but with the caveat that his standpoint rests on a phenomenological reading of historical materialism distinct from other “Western Marxists.”

As a relation, motivation is essentially two-fold in expression. Whether one considers individual or collective forms of expression, the “lived logic” of existence is a dialectical movement of distinct motives (the “motivating” and the “motivated”) striving to respond to a given situation. The significance and strength of each motive in relation to the other depends on one’s lifeworld familiarity with the general logic/meaning of the situation, on the one hand, and the contingencies of the situation calling for a response, on the other. In familiar contexts where norms or institutions have already been prepared to appropriately handle things and thus orient a viable response, the situation is naturally experienced as *motivating*. In this case, one’s background intentions are already experienced and, as such, they encounter a sensible, meaningful, and cooperative world that appears ready to facilitate their expression with little effort. It could be said that one’s motivating intentions largely determine the response or “the situation as undertaken” (Miller 1979, 212).

In *unfamiliar* contexts, by contrast, where normal/institutionalized ways of responding are relatively ineffective or irrelevant, the response is extrinsically *motivated* by the specific contingencies of the situation. Here, the established intentions that one brings to the situation *a priori* are outweighed by the things themselves calling for a more focused and deliberate response. For instance, learning—conceptual, emotional, behavioral, historical, etc.—occurs when the motivated situation calling for a response is successfully answered. When problems find solutions, when the unfamiliar becomes familiar, this is originally because “the situation as fact” held more weight in determining the “situation as undertaken” (Ibid). If confirmed and reinforced over time, the contingent situation initially encountered as unfamiliar or problematic in the foreground of lifeworld

experience can become operative at the background level of normative intentionality. Hence, when learning, the extrinsically motivated shifts to become intrinsically motivating, informing how future situations of the same genre are experienced and responded to.

Taking an example from visual perception, consider the familiar figure of a chair. It is immediately recognized for what it is against the background sensibilities of lifeworld existence. The appearance of the chair is certainly motivated by the thing *perceived*, but the *perceiver* motivating perception plays a more significant role insofar as chairs are already an integral part of everyday life. Thanks to past experience with such things (which is at once personal, collective, and historical), the perceiver brings a complex background of meaning structures motivating perception of the chair as, say, something to sit on in certain setting (like a kitchen). Even an unusual chair design not personally experienced before might, with a little extra (motivated) attention, be easily recognized as in fact ‘a chair’ if it appears like it was made for sitting or encountered in a familiar setting. But if, by contrast, a given chair on first encounter is sufficiently unfamiliar and it’s not obviously made for sitting (like a kneeling chair) or the setting isn’t enough to clue one in, perception will be more motivated by the senseless thing than motivating. However, with enough observation, instruction, etc., the weight of perception will shift or transition in the other direction to become more motivating than motivated—and thus immediately recognizable for what it is moving forward.

Ultimately, I argue that responding to the climate situation for what it is requires a similar gestalt shift, but at the collective and historical level where one speaks of institutions rather than norms. Yet, compared to the simple chair scenario, the

motivational challenge of ethically and politically responding to climate change is on the opposite side of the spectrum. Considering the former, one can assume that the perceptual transition (from motivated attention on first contact with the unusual thing to motivating self-evidence thereafter) would require little effort. Simply seeing someone use the chair might be enough (“Oh, it’s a chair”). This is because, although the thing initially perceived was unfamiliar in the *particular*, the perceiver nevertheless embodied a high degree of familiarity with ‘chairs’ in *general*, and this background afforded the normative traction needed to quickly make sense of the ambiguous object. Indeed, the curious artifact could only stand out as *abnormal* against a general background of normality.

What makes the climate “situation as fact” so difficult to accurately perceive—and thus think about, discuss, emotionally process, act on, or in a word *respond* to—partially reflects a dearth of normative traction. If the chair was absurd on its face, the systemic implications of climate change are absurd in the background. In essential respects, the climate problem is foreign to, and indeed conflicts with, the basic structures of meaning sedimented in the furthest reaches of collective experience where the everyday world acquires its quality of self-evidence. The existential implications of climate change fundamentally challenge the “lived logic” of existence comprehensively orienting (motivating) perception, rationality, discursivity, affectivity, behavior, and so on.<sup>17</sup> The strange and curious chair, of course, did no such thing.

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<sup>17</sup> As I argue in chapters three and five (and touch on below), one of the most powerful existential implications of the climate problem is that it contradicts the socio-cultural project of controlling and dominating the world (human and nonhuman) roundly orienting co-existence. It does so, for instance, to the extent that the exigencies of climate response imply a shift to working with, not against, nature. For many, taking in these implications fully would challenge perceptions of nature as a stockpile of resources for mass production and consumption and of technology as a tool to maximize human exploitation indefinitely. More specifically, many would have to question the way they think, feel, and talk about their values and aspirations to achieve

The gestalt shift required to effectively respond to climate change, therefore, must be *prepared* for precisely where this lived logic secretly operates without notice (and here we revisit the virtues of the positive vision stance). There is certainly enough public knowledge available to make sense of the climate problem in some way or another. Being motivated by the hard historical and material realities of the climate situation, however, presupposes a motivating background against which this reality can stand out. Hence, comprehensive positive visions of an alternative world of social and socio-ecological relations are needed that are compelling enough to become normative at this level.

Bringing this framework to the collective action problem at hand, experienced movements are ultimately required that effectively achieve this existential relation of motivation. A mature climate movement capable of putting regimes on the defensive and drawing lasting public support would progressively blur (but not erase) the line between being problem-driven and solution-driven. As problem-driven, they must be motivated to take ethical responsibility by orienting themselves to what the issue *itself* demands. This requires an integrity and moral fortitude that compels the movement to respect the realities confronting them, keep expectations and self-serving tendencies in check, humbly learn from mistakes, make appropriate sacrifices, and commit to material success for as long as it takes. Critically, however, such a stance cannot root itself in moral discipline or limit itself to perceivable consequences alone. A viable movement isn't simply *pushed* to action by the problem. It must also *pull itself* forward by inspiring

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the good life—as defined, for instance, by normative standards of social status, respect, and esteem (of “success,” doing “well,” being “someone,” getting “ahead,” having “a life,” and so on).

solutions meaningful enough to realize political transcendence—an historical feat that can only be perceived as impossible from a purely problem-driven perspective.

Are there any precedents for such an accomplishment? In the American context, it has become common in some climate circles to imagine being a 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist courageously motivated by a full comprehension of the socio-cultural depth and historical inertia of the slavery problem (including the entrenched structures of power committed and well-positioned to resist action on this issue at any cost). One could reasonably speculate, however, that abolitionists were also inspired by positive visions of, say, an enlightened, liberal modernity slowly emerging in the background. From this perspective, the historical “solution” to the slavery problem involved further motivating the liberal dream of freedom and equality already in motion—that motivating Light destined to dispel and leave behind the Dark Ages of the past once and for all. With this historical tension in place, the slavery problem was generally *felt* such that even entrenched socio-economic forces, together with a barrage of cultural arguments for white supremacy meant to legitimize the institution, could eventually buckle.<sup>18</sup>

It is not uncommon to compare the ethico-political task confronting problem-driven climate activists with the remarkable experience of committed abolitionists confronting the systemic, socio-cultural depths of slavery. Yet, unlike the dream motivating modernity that put slavery into sharp relief (and motivated a decisive response accordingly), there doesn’t appear to be an alternative socio-cultural vision of the future

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<sup>18</sup>I do not mean to suggest that this historical “buckling” occurred under its own weight in some simplified Hegelian or Marxian sense (making the civil war inevitable or Southern defeat inevitable). Although I am focusing here on the cultural-historical facets of this phenomenon vis-à-vis the significance of positive visions, it has to be emphasized that history is profoundly contingent, and thus always open to “detours” as Merleau-Ponty has said.

that is comprehensive enough—and emerging quickly enough—to garner the normative power required to put systemic climate change into proper perspective.<sup>19</sup> As such, too many in the industrialized world responsible for climate change do not feel historically and materially *situated* by this problem for what it is. A critical phenomenology of the climate situation, I submit, suggests that climate change has not yet taken place in the existential marrow of everyday experience. To this extent, many in the industrialized world are not motivated to take historical responsibility for it.

The existential and critical reading of the collective action problem advanced in this dissertation gives new meaning to the paradox of inaction noticed by thinkers on the subject. I have suggested that, without an alternative historical project inspired and oriented by a positive vision of a just and sustainable future, the historical tensions required to be motivated by the systemic implications of climate change aren't likely to be felt with much weight (particularly, but not exclusively, within privileged groups). Again, questions with no viable answers on the horizon aren't asked, and problems completely beyond the reach of solutions aren't perceived as problems. Returning full circle, however, it's also true in reverse that answers and solutions presuppose questions and problems. Motivating projects/solutions appropriately historical in vision aren't

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<sup>19</sup> To be clear, there is certainly no shortage of positive visions in circulation today with considerable historical/cultural momentum behind them to build on (see footnote 9). Many in the industrialized world, for instance, are moved by visions of a more sustainable relation to nature premised on renewing a meaningful respect for the nonhuman world (ecology, land, animals, etc.). Likewise, many find visions of social justice and peace inspiring. In my view, however, philosophical incongruities between these historically distinct visions remain that have yet to be worked out before more comprehensive visions of “climate justice” can take hold. It is difficult, for instance, to meaningfully grasp connections between problematic social relations and problematic socio-ecological relations (and thus imagine positive visions that might resolve these different structural problems coherently). But more to the point, perhaps, I would venture to suggest that—outside of college towns, say, or some circles in big cities where certain privileges afford reflection and dialogue on these matters—these visions simply can't compete with the socio-cultural inertia of global capitalism driving the climate problem in its full implications. This, in my view, is precisely why a critical phenomenology of climate response is needed.

likely to fully develop and catch on without first being historically motivated by the problem they're intended to be responsive to. Here, we encounter the paradox of motivation in historical context. If motivated questions/problems are mutually intertwined with motivating answers/solutions, then how does this existential relation of motivation shift in history? This, it seems, constitutes the “highest”—and most fraught with complexity and ambiguity—question tasked by a critical phenomenology of systemic transition. What, for instance, prepared the dramatic shift in Western civilization from medieval theocracy and feudalism to modern liberalism and capitalism?

Merleau-Ponty calls transitions of this order “matrix events,” which can be understood as gestalt shifts in the basic logic of socio-cultural existence. Events of such magnitude signal the advent of an historical project or “total intention” motivating a new relation to the world—which also means to the past, present, and future. This might be thought of as the historical answer to the most general question that can be asked in the context of lived experience, “the question of existence.” As an historical project, this totalizing intention *projects* existence. Although heterogenous in expression, it orients how a people structure their material relations to nature and to each other, along with the cultural structures of meaning that put this relation to the world into perspective.

Drawing on ecofeminists Carolyn Merchant and Val Plumwood (in connection with Husserl's lifeworld genealogy of nature and research on socio-cultural differences in climate denial treated in chapter three), I argue that the historical project of industrialization motivating climate change and climate denial alike expresses a total intention to dominate the social and socio-ecological world. In the last analysis, then, I conclude that collective action requires cultivating a total intention capable of realizing

an alternative gestalt of social and socio-ecological relations. If the industrialized world is indeed generally oriented towards dominion, critically recognizing this total intention requires a *contrasting* model of relationality that is equally comprehensive in scope but more compelling in vision. In this spirit, Merchant and Plumwood argue that a domineering model of relationships must give way to a *mutualistic* model of social and socio-ecological relations understood as expressions of “partnership” and “dialogue,” respectively. As a total intention in the making, a socio-cultural paradigm shift towards *dialogical partnership* would have to be general enough to mean a number of different things to different people, but within the parameters set by the problem-driven demands for systemic transition.

Were an existential shift from traditional projects of domination to visionary projects of dialogical partnership to take hold in the background of lifeworld existence, perceptions of climate change would acquire the weight of common sense. For instance, if the old project—exemplified by technocrats and pragmatists—intends to make the climate work for the anthropocentric, patriarchal, and Eurocentric system of industrial capitalism, framing this issue as a violation of dialogical partnership might disclose these “solutions” as in fact symptomatic of the basic problem to begin with. With respect to relations of motivation, what were once motivating solutions would become an embodied problem that people are now consciously motivated to address.

If Husserl and Heidegger can help us make sense of the existential barriers to collective action on climate change, Merleau-Ponty’s work is suited to confronting the critical challenge of overcoming them in practice. The dissertation, however, is not intended to address the details of political strategy. As Aristotle (1925, 2) counsels in his

work on ethics, one must not expect more precision than the subject matter admits of. The problem of climate response is overwhelming in its scope, complexity, and urgency. And in this very respect, I suggest, it is interdisciplinary in general and philosophical in particular. The implications of this issue call into question modernity's most essential institutions—both those that comprehensively organize social and socio-ecological relations and those that comprehensively organize cultural norms, values, and narratives. Hence, to appropriate something Merleau-Ponty (1964b, 9) said concerning the state of Marxism in his time, “an enormous labor is required to put things into perspective.” With this caveat in mind, the subject matter of this dissertation is intended to help prepare the way for more productive avenues of cultivating politically motivated ethical responsibility and ethically motivating political agency.

## CHAPTER II

### CLIMATE CHANGE AS A COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM:

#### STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO ETHICAL MOTIVATION

##### *Introduction*

The general lesson of the past quarter-century of political experience suggests that the problem of climate response is ultimately a problem of motivation. This statement is at once too banal to even bring up and too perplexing to confront. To a considerable degree, questions of climate motivation hinge on the nature of the climate problem orienting the response. The general purpose of this chapter is to broadly introduce the challenges of motivating a collective response to climate change as a *systemic* problem. Put otherwise, this chapter can be thought of as an introduction to the systemic logic of the climate situation. My treatment of this systemic logic as it relates to motivation evolves over the course of the dissertation. But in this chapter, I contend that the climate issue is systemic insofar as it implicates the matrix of social and cultural institutions driving the industrialized world in a comprehensive sense. The historical forces perpetuating the material causes of climate change since the Industrial Revolution deeply implicate the social and cultural institutions structuring collective existence. As such, the system of institutions structurally driving climate change also functions as structural barriers to motivating a collective response to this issue. Under these conditions, I argue that ethical motivation is needed at the collective level to overcome these systemic barriers—and focus, accordingly, on the basic challenges complicating this task.

Along these lines the chapter begins with a critique of the dominant political approaches to climate change, which tend to be technocratic and pragmatic in orientation.

My entry to the systemic logic of the climate problem here comes from examining the decades of misguided effort trying to confront this issue technocratically and pragmatically. This effort signals *institutional* failure in a broad sense, not just an unfortunate string of political misadventures. Climate technocracy and pragmatism are predisposed to fail insofar as they uncritically rely on the very institutions responsible for the climate problem in the first place. These approaches might work for problems that fall within the socio-cultural parameters of industrialized existence, but not with systemic problems that roundly contradict industrialized existence in essential ways. With attention to structures of power, moreover, I argue that these approaches are implicitly motivated to overlook the systemic depths of the climate problem. To the extent that technocrats and pragmatists are firmly situated by the very system of institutions driving climate change from the very start, they tend to favor narrowly technical and politically-palatable “solutions” that ultimately preserve, not challenge, the system.

Insofar as the climate issue is indeed systemic in depth and scope, therefore, the immediate challenge isn’t simply to enact political solutions as quickly as possible, but to motivate a deeper confrontation with the systemic roots of the climate problem. In other words, I argue, the challenge at this point is to shift from the misled “solution-driven” approaches hegemonic from the very beginning to a genuinely “problem-driven” approach—where the former is politically (and economically) motivated to protect business as usual and the latter is *ethically* motivated to confront it. The basic task here of motivating a problem-driven response to climate change can be loosely framed as a “collective action problem” in contradistinction to the technocratic and pragmatic framing that we hope to supplant. In calling for a motivational shift, however, I should be

clear that I don't simply mean galvanizing collective action on climate change. I mean *appropriately orientating* it. This point is essential to the dissertation project. There is a widespread tendency to think of motivation in binary fashion: motivation to do something is either present or absent, strong or weak—as if willpower is a substance (perhaps stimulated by environmental conditions or by certain ideas). For instance, when communicators conscious of the urgent need to act quickly claim that “political will” is the only thing needed to solve climate change, they arguably proffer the assumption shared by climate technocrats and pragmatists that the problem is already clearly in sight and the tools of response are readily available. All that is really required, it would seem, is the political stimulus to pick up these tools and get to work on the problem until it's solved. The systemic nature of climate change, however, deeply complicates this common view of motivation. In their zeal for results, climate technocrats and pragmatists certainly don't suffer from a *lack* of motivation but from *misdirected* motivation. Hence, in lieu of thinking about motivation as a toggle switch or focusing on amplitude alone, the language of ‘orientation’ is more helpful, particularly in collective contexts.

With this in mind, I devote the majority of the chapter to detailing the general contours of the collective action problem adumbrated above. Specifically, I cross-examine three positions or arguments that highlight three structural vectors essential to collectively orienting a problem-driven response to climate change. Collective action of this kind, I argue, has to be appropriately oriented politically, culturally, and socially.

The first vector is *political* to the extent that it concerns institutionalized power.<sup>20</sup> The significance of this dimension is nicely captured by Chris Cuomo’s analysis of climate responsibility. Sensitive to structural differences in power relations, she argues that ethical motivation has to be politically oriented from the bottom up. As Cuomo explains, those occupying the centers of power in the industrialized world bearing most responsibility for the climate problem are not motivated to confront it and are effectively immune to ethical arguments for doing so. Hence, on political grounds, she argues that it falls on highly motivated citizens that are concerned enough to take responsibility for the problem themselves in the form of grassroots movements committed to holding decision-makers accountable.

Importantly, however, Cuomo leaves questions about the challenges of ethically motivating this kind of responsibility unanswered. Hence, having identified the political locus of ethical motivation at the grassroots level, the next step is to examine the other two vectors of the collective action problem. This takes me to Dale Jamieson and Stephen Gardiner’s works. Their accounts of climate change as a collective action problem corroborate Cuomo’s call for an ethically motivated response to this systemic issue, but they also focus attention on the *cultural* and *social* barriers to achieving this. Generally speaking, collective motivation is oriented by institutions that structure how people

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<sup>20</sup> My use of the term “political” in this context might be confusing since I am criticizing climate technocracy and pragmatism in this chapter for being “politically motivated.” The significance of institutionalized power is common to each use of this term. In the technocracy/pragmatism context, however, ‘the political’ is deemed problematic to the extent that it overrides the ethical (i.e., problem-driven considerations) for the sake of developing “solutions” *agreeable* to powerful interests. In the present context of ethically-orienting collective action, by contrast, a sensitivity to the political is deemed critical to *challenging* existing power structures. Essentially, then, I am arguing that ethical action has to be partially oriented by a political sense of how power operates in relation to the climate issue—and it’s on this basis that I might support movements that embody this kind of political acumen while criticizing the political instrumentalism of climate technocracy/pragmatism.

normally perceive situations or problems of common concern and respond to them in practice. However, the dominant cultural and social institutions in the industrialized world perpetuating climate change also function as structural barriers to motivating a collective response to this systemic problem. Jamieson, for his part, argues that the barriers to ethically motivating collective action are predominantly cultural. Insofar as people generally struggle to *make sense* of the ethical implications of this unprecedented global and intergenerational issue, orienting a problem-driven response calls for a cultural paradigm shift in ethical sensibilities. Gardiner, by contrast, focuses on the social institutions orientating *practical behavior* as the most essential barriers to collective action. To the extent that existing economic and political structures don't afford viable avenues for a practical response to the ethical contingencies of the climate problem, new institutions are needed to create spaces for decisive action.

The arguments put forward by Cuomo, Jamieson, and Gardiner are valuable in that each brings out the structural vectors—political, cultural, and social, respectively—essential to collectively orienting an ethical response to the climate problem. Nevertheless, each position suffers important limitations given the comprehensive scope and systemic depths of the climate challenge. Simply put, I argue that each neglects the significance of the other two. I have already suggested, for instance, that Cuomo's political argument for ethical responsibility at the grassroots level stops short of analyzing the structural (cultural and social) barriers to ethical motivation. But I also argue that Jamieson's cultural analysis neglects the significance of political power and social institutions. Likewise, I submit that Gardiner's social analysis undertheorizes political power and cultural institutions. On the one hand, then, Jamieson and Gardiner's

positions lack the kind of political focus that comes with careful attention to systemic power relations. On the other hand, their positions are philosophically problematic to the extent that they rely on reductive conceptions of collective motivation along the culture/society axis.

Having cross-examined all three positions, I suggest by the chapter's conclusion that greater philosophical synthesis is needed to grapple with the political, cultural, and social vectors of the collective action problem more comprehensively. Put otherwise, I argue that coming to terms with the challenges of collectively orienting an ethical response to climate change as a systemic problem demands a better philosophical grasp of the relation between institutions and motivation across the political, cultural, and social domains of intersubjective experience. In my view, the real power of existing institutions to maintain status-quo approaches to climate change over problem-driven responses is neither cultural nor social in force, but *socio-cultural*. Hence, as I shall argue more fully in the next and final chapters, a comprehensive understanding of the relation between cultural and social motives is needed to adequately grapple with the ethical and political challenges of climate response. In anticipation of the next chapter, therefore, I close this one by proposing a shift in philosophical perspective from a structural analysis of the barriers to collective action to lifeworld analysis of how these structural relations are embodied in collective experience. The promise of a lifeworld approach to the collective action problem swirling in this confusing soup of relations is precisely that it allows us to carefully tease out the multidimensional complexities of motivation at play in the face of this deeply systemic problem. In the end, it just isn't enough to ground theory on the institutional barriers to collective action. It is equally important to consider *how* these

institutions are “actively” experienced and taken up by those who are otherwise “passively” situated by them.

### ***The Solution-Driven Politics of Climate Technocracy and Pragmatism***

Ever since James Hansen testified before the U.S. Congress in 1988, the first IPCC report was issued in 1990, and the first COP undertaken in 1995, the scientific evidence for, and consensus on, anthropogenic climate change has solidified to a remarkable degree. At the same time, warnings of risk in the face of inaction have grown increasingly explicit and grave, and calls for aggressive mitigation and adaptation measures have taken an exceedingly urgent tone. Overall, however, global emissions over the past two decades haven't decreased or even leveled off but have continued increasing at an alarming rate. According to the fifth report from the IPCC (2014), global emissions grew at a faster rate over the 2000-2010 decade than they had over the three previous decades.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, thanks to decades of consistently thwarting, stalling, and watering down measures to address this issue at all levels of policy, global emissions will need to be 40 to 70% lower in 2050 than they were in 2010 to remain below the 2°C threshold, and by the end of the century they will need to be net zero (if not negative).<sup>22</sup>

Although the political history of the climate issue is a tortured one in its complexity, the general outcome is clear. Going down the list of national and

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<sup>21</sup> As remarked in footnote 1 above, global emissions have nearly leveled off in the three-year period between 2014 and 2016 only to pick up again in 2017 and especially 2018.

<sup>22</sup> According to the last installment of the fifth IPCC report, which focused on mitigating climate change, in order to keep warming under the 2°C (3.6°F) threshold agreed on by the world's governments at a 2009 meeting in Copenhagen, greenhouse gas emissions in 2050 will have to be 40 to 70 percent lower than what they were in 2010 (Thompson 2015). By the end of the century, they will need to be at zero, or could possibly even require taking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, a controversial proposition.

international efforts over the past two to three decades, efforts to address climate change—the Kyoto Protocol, the Copenhagen Accord, and the European Union’s Emissions Trading System (cap-and-trade), to name a few high-profile measures—haven’t met expectations.

Despite this record, is there reason to invest hope in the Paris Agreement? In 2015, every country in the world recognized by the United Nations (except Syria and Nicaragua) signed the agreement to hold “the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels.”<sup>23</sup> This was hailed by *The Guardian* as “the world’s greatest diplomatic success” and received similar accolades around the world (Harvey 2015). The price for achieving this univocal agreement on targets, however, is dispiriting. Unlike previous attempts to coordinate an international response to climate change (all of which arguably failed in the face of opposition from nations dependent on the fossil fuel industry, especially the United States), the Paris Agreement lacks binding enforcement mechanisms to hold the signatory nations accountable. James Hansen (2015) dismissed the Agreement as a “total fraud” based on promises rather than firm commitments. The think tank World Pensions Council noted that the objectives are “predicated upon an assumption”

that member states of the United Nations, including high polluters such as China, the US, India, Brazil, Canada, Russia, Indonesia and Australia, which generate more than half the world’s greenhouse gas emissions, will somehow drive down their carbon pollution voluntarily and assiduously without any binding enforcement mechanism to measure and control CO<sub>2</sub> emissions at any level from factory to state, and without any

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<sup>23</sup> In 2015, every country in the world recognized by the United Nations (except Syria and Nicaragua) signed the agreement to hold “the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels” (UNFCC 2015).

specific penalty gradation or fiscal pressure (for example a carbon tax) to discourage bad behaviour. A shining example of what Roman lawyers called circular logic: an agreement (or argument) presupposing in advance what it wants to achieve. (Firzli 2016)

According to the United Nations itself (UNEP), moreover, even if the pledged targets were universally achieved, global temperatures would still rise by 3°C by 2100,<sup>24</sup> which substantially exceeds the agreed-upon 2°C threshold (which is already controversial because, for instance, it would likely mean the complete submergence of some island states due to sea level rise). Worst of all, every major industrialized nation is failing to meet their pledges and aren't even implementing the policies they planned to enact to do so (Victor et al. 2017).

Maybe concerns about the mechanics of various agreements and policies miss the larger point. Perhaps even a globally universal protocol ideally predicated on “binding enforcement mechanisms” isn't likely to succeed. Reflecting on the Kyoto Protocol in *Climate-Challenged Society*, for example, John Dryzek, *et al.*, write:

[T]he experience of the Kyoto Protocol shows that even when a country does agree to a target and a timetable for reducing emissions, there is little guarantee that its government will actually seek to achieve the target; most of the Annex One [industrialized] countries failed to achieve their...target. Even if a government tries to meet its commitment, it may not succeed. The policies adopted may prove inadequate in practice and fail in their implementation. Policy analysts, interest organizations, and politicians disagree about the best strategy to adopt...Even if the national community can develop a course of action, producers and consumers will not necessarily comply with the policy decisions in questions. (Dryzek, Norgaard, and Schlosberg 2013, 12)

By all appearances, the dominant approaches to climate change are only scratching the surface of this deeply challenging problem.

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<sup>24</sup> As reported by the UN in October 2017, “The eighth edition of UNEP’s Emissions Gap Report...warns that as things stand, even full implementation of current national pledges makes a temperature rise of at least 3 degrees Celsius by 2100 very likely” (UN News 2017).

In an effort to bring comprehension to the history of policy failure sketched above, we would do well to begin by examining the dominant ways in which climate change has been framed. Consider first that this issue has been treated predominantly as a technocratic problem. Technocratic approaches require objectively defining the problem at hand such that it can be broken down into manageable sectors. These are then coordinated by centralized authorities charged with allocating responsibility for each subset of the problem to trained specialists. This top-down logic of problem-management has dominated climate politics from the very beginning. The various facets of the climate problem have been defined technocratically by specialists working within their respective institutions, and political responses to it have been administered accordingly. Scientists identify the material nature of the problem, engineers create green technologies to mitigate it, economists calculate costs and benefits to channel market forces, non-governmental organizations lobby politicians who negotiate competing interest, and policy makers are charged with legislating the whole process to ensure success in practice. With respect to international efforts, recall that the UN created the IPCC to establish scientific authority on the problem, instituted the UNFCCC to coordinate an international response, and passed the Kyoto Protocol to impose legally binding emissions targets for responsible nations. Within this technocratic framework, each nation was then expected to enact rational policies accordingly. Yet, after decades of experience, it has become increasingly evident that the climate issue is far too multifaceted and comprehensive in scope to be administered technocratically. Dryzek, *et al.* note:

taken in isolation, many of the particular problems [related to climate change] do not look so bad. If we isolate each particular problem, we often find that we know quite a

lot of in terms of the consequences of inaction for social systems, and the repertoire of available responses...What we know much less is how to *comprehend and respond to the entirety of the challenge*, because the different bits can interact in unexpected, counterintuitive, or poorly understood ways. It is the interactions between the different aspects (and with other issues) that really causes difficulties. (Ibid, 13; italics added)

To the extent that technocratic success depends on the institutional infrastructure coordinating the process (infrastructure that is itself implicated and indeed invested in the causes of climate change), decades of immaterial effort across multiple scales suggest institutional failure in a very broad sense. There is considerable reason to believe that the essential challenge of responding to climate change doesn't boil down to *technique* whereby manageable solutions can be derived from objectively-defined problems. Once the systemic nature of the climate problem is acknowledged, technocratic approaches that uncritically rely on these institutions no longer appear viable. The larger challenge is to *collectively motivate* appropriate action in response to institutional failures.

In lieu of approaching climate change technocratically, it has become increasingly common to frame this issue as a "collective action problem." Dryzek, *et al.* describe the systemic nature of climate policy failure to offer a sociological reading of this collective action problem.

If we examine the social, political, and economic systems as they have developed in the past few centuries, they are highly adapted to deal with three kinds of problems: war, economy, and welfare. History does of course show periodic failure on all three fronts. But failure begets collective mobilization...Climate change is an altogether different problem. Climate change seems to demand a degree of large-scale, collective, multifaceted, coordinated, persistent, public-spirited, self-sacrificing, and—crucially—anticipatory responses of a kind never before seen in human affairs. It challenges the very character of a global civilization that has been built on fossil fuels...Taking climate change seriously changes everything, from political systems that seem to require continued economic growth to secure their legitimacy and so survive, to cultures of mass consumption that everyone...seems to want. We have already noted that society can occasionally generate massive coordinated responses to collective problems—but that response is a reactive one in response to clear catastrophes that

have already occurred on a very short time-scale...Climate change is not like that; it is slow burning. (Ibid, 14-15)

One reading from this passage is that existing institutions are simply ill-prepared to address an issue like climate change. Thanks to historical experience, economic and political institutions currently in place can generally handle large-scale problems pertaining to war, the economy, and public welfare, but not an entirely unprecedented problem like climate change. On this view, one might say that climate change is “systemic” primarily in a negative sense in that modern societies simply *lack* the appropriate institutions needed to facilitate a collective response to this problem. In my view, however, the deeper point is that the social and cultural institutions that technocrats tacitly rely on are intrinsic to (i.e., invested in) the problem in the first place, and this includes structures of institutionalized power. As a systemic problem, this particular issue “changes everything” because it “challenges the very character of a global civilization that has been built on fossil fuels.” If the problem merely amounted to a lack of historical experience, one could imagine success by implementing new institutions like the Kyoto Protocol or adapting old ones to facilitate an appropriate response (as in “cap-and-trade”). But given the high levels of motivation from powerful economic and political stakeholders at the top to actively resist a truly effective response, together with the low levels of motivation at the public level to hold these interests accountable, it seems that more than a lack of historical experience is at issue here. To the extent that existing institutions are not just ill-prepared but *positively motivate* the climate problem, then technological, scientific, economic, and policy “solutions” will never be enough.

Although technocratic approaches appear to be the most politically feasible in the face of a problem demanding expediency, I would argue that they systematically

overlook how deeply systemic the climate problem is by jumping too quickly to solutions that conveniently protect, rather than challenge, the status quo. Here we touch on the role institutions serve in legitimizing (and thus maintaining) structures of power with interests vested in business as usual. Perhaps the significance of institutionalized power in the face of a systemic problem like climate change is best gleaned by examining the mainstream climate movement. Although the environmental movement once dedicated itself to grassroots action, it has since become thoroughly professionalized and structurally aligned with the very institutions that have consistently failed to facilitate appropriate action. That is, what Stuart Rosewarne, *et al.* (Rosewarne, Goodman, and Pearse 2013, 27) have called the “institutionalisation of the environmental movement” has come to share the same top-down logic of technocratic problem-solving pushed by corporate leaders, politicians, and policy-makers. To the extent that the climate movement is defined by professional environmental organizations positioned by many of the same structural forces situating those most responsible for the problem, their ability to confront a systemic issue like climate change was arguably compromised from the start. Indeed, this failure is especially concerning given the perceived legitimacy they have in the public eye beyond their corporate and state counterparts. Arguably, the seal of this legitimacy to sincerely address climate change—uncorrupted by political and economic motives to oppose climate action—is itself a powerful barrier to motivating action.

Gus Speth lays out seven features of mainstream environmentalism that succinctly capture what might be called the systemic logic of top-down change.

[W]hen today’s environmentalism recognizes problems, it believes they can be solved within the system, typically with new policies and, more recently, by engaging the corporate sector...The second notable feature of today’s environmentalism is that it tends to be pragmatic and incrementalist. Its actions are aimed at solving problems,

often one at a time...These tendencies are closely allied to a third: the tendency to deal with effects rather than underlying causes...Fourth, today's environmentalism believes that problems can be solved at acceptable economic costs—and often with net economic benefit—without significant lifestyle changes or threats to economic growth...Fifth, it sees solutions coming largely from within the environmental sector...Sixth, today's environmentalism is not focused strongly on political activity or organizing a grassroots movement. [This has] played second fiddle to lobbying, litigating, and working with government agencies and corporations...And last, today's environmentalism entrusts major action to expert bureaucracies. (Speth 2008, 69-70)

Particularly in the face of systemic problems like climate change, Speth concludes that the underlying assumption dooming technocratic and pragmatic approaches from the very beginning is that our dominant institutions can be reformed to work for the environment. “Working only within the system will, in the end, not succeed when what is needed is transformative change in the system itself” (Ibid, 86).

As Speth remarks (echoing pioneering work by environmental justice scholars), the environmental tradition going back to the turn of the twentieth century has long appealed to privileged demographics that tend to take the legitimacy of the system for granted—and have, accordingly, dedicated themselves to making it work for a healthy environment. Yet, there is a notable blip in this swath of history. The 1960s and 1970s experienced an environmentalism that embodied the anti-establishment grassroots characteristic of the social justice and peace movements that were exploded at this time. As Naomi Klein (2014, 201) remarks, “by today’s standards, the environmentalists of that era look like fire-breathing radicals.” It hasn’t escaped notice, moreover, that this was a time of astonishing political success marked by a wave of environmental legislation in the United States enacted by a conservative president.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, comparing

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<sup>25</sup> Most notably, these include the National Environmental Policy Act (1969) that established the Environmental Protection Agency (1970), the Clean Water Act (1972), and the Endangered Species Act (1973), all passed under the Nixon Administration

the grassroots successes of this time with the remarkable policy failures on the environment since then should give one pause.<sup>26</sup>

Speth and Klein argue that the environmental movement has effectively been coopted by the neoliberal shift in politics that solidified in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, what was once an effective grassroots movement has become increasingly supported by, and beholden to, established institutional structures and interests. Speth's critique has garnered a lot of attention due in part to his extensive experience as the "ultimate insider" at the highest levels of the movement.<sup>27</sup> Standing explicitly on a climate justice platform, however, Klein's exposé of the "disastrous merger of big business and big green" examines this history in political detail. Faced with the pro-business, anti-environmental turn of the Reagan Administration, she explains, environmental organizations faced a dilemma in the 1980s that largely determined their path in the decades that followed (Ibid, 191). Although some organizations, like Greenpeace, continued to pursue a direct action approach, others found themselves "competing for limited philanthropic dollars" and confronted with an "antigovernment logic of market triumphalism" that put the earlier strategy of environmental regulation on the defensive (Ibid, 205). Increasingly, the latter had to worry about their survival as organizations and make practical decisions accordingly. Slowly but surely, the largely

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<sup>26</sup> As Speth notes, however, it is also relevant that environmental problems have become increasingly global in nature, which are more difficult to address effectively.

<sup>27</sup> This begins with his position in the Carter Administration as a top environmental advisor. Klein (2014, 205) writes: "After years in high-level jobs inside the U.N. system and as a dean of Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Speth has today thrown his lot in with the radicals, getting arrested to protest the Keystone XL pipeline and co-founding an organization questioning the logic of economic growth."

problem-driven stance of earlier years turned toward a pragmatic “win-win” attitude of cooperation.

These groups pitched themselves as modern environmentalists for the Regan era: pro-business, non-confrontational, and ready to help polish even the most tarnished corporate logos. ‘Our approach is one of collaboration, rather than confrontation. We are creative, entrepreneurial, and partnership driven. We don’t litigate,’ explains the Conservation Fund. (Ibid, 205-206)

Eventually, she continues, these partnerships became “more structural than mere donations” (Ibid, 196). The Nature Conservancy, to take a particularly egregious example, has had some of the most powerful players in the fossil fuel industry on their board of directors, and even invested its own money in these corporations (Ibid).

The results of this “merger” were consequential. By blurring any contradictions between the logic of economic growth and the systemic roots of climate change, these alliances arguably soothed public concerns as otherwise disturbing scientific reports continued to gain media attention. When, despite reassurances, public concerns grew and policy responses started looming, these alliances also provided corporations the perceived legitimacy they needed to successfully push for the least-burdensome policy responses possible. Indeed, corporate-sponsored environmental organization were themselves pushing hard for natural gas fracking as a “transitional” energy source, as well as market-friendly mitigation measures like “cap-and-trade” and a return to nuclear power. These and other compromises, Klein (Ibid, 200) explains, were “rationalized according to the theory of ‘low-hanging fruit’,” but they ultimately reveal the defensive position these environmentalists found themselves in. Environmentalism, as Speth says, had become a movement that “takes what it can get” (Ibid, 69).

The political folly of this pragmatic calculation would reveal itself in due time. Klein offers an example of this by recounting the case of the Waxman-Markey Bill of 2009.<sup>28</sup> First, it should be noted that forming partnerships is most attractive to corporations when public concerns about the climate rise to uncomfortable levels. Hence, in 2007 when public concern was at a high-point and climate legislation looked likely (not long after Al Gore released *An Inconvenient Truth* and the IPCC released its Fourth Report), the United States Climate Action Partnership was formed and helped draft the Waxman-Markey Bill shortly thereafter. The Bill was sold as a market-friendly cap-and-trade approach to climate change that would not impact economic growth. With the legitimizing support of environmental organizations, the bill was substantially watered down with loopholes and industry-friendly incentive structures (for example, it “specifically barred the EPA from regulating carbon from many major pollution sources, including coal-fired power plants” (Ibid, 227)). But even as these partnerships were being formed, corporate money was also being funneled into foundations like The Heartland Institute to systematically confuse and cast doubt on climate change (Jacques, Dunlap, and Freeman 2008; Oreskes and Conway 2010). In a period of only a few years, public concerns about climate change dropped dramatically thanks in part to these well-funded efforts, changing the political calculation. Hence, with declining public support since the partnerships were formed (in addition to a number of other factors like the rise of Tea Party politics ramping up anti-government discourse and threatening moderate Republicans), even this market-friendly approach wasn’t worth supporting by the time it

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<sup>28</sup> Formally known as The American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009.

was ready for consideration. The fossil fuel companies largely withdrew from these partnerships and the bill was defeated.

[T]hinking they were playing a savvy inside game, Big Green was outmaneuvered on a grand scale. The environmentalists...disastrously misread the political landscape. They chose a stunningly convoluted approach to tackling climate change, one that would have blocked far more effective strategies, specifically because it was appealing to big emitters—only to discover that the most appealing climate policy was none at all. Worse, once their corporate partners fled the coalition, they had no shortage of ammo to fire at their former friends. The climate bill was boondoggled, they claimed (it was), filled with handouts and subsidies (absolutely), and it would pass on higher energy costs to cash-strapped consumers (likely). To top it all off, as pro-oil Republican congressman Joe Barton put it, ‘The environmental benefit is non-existent (as the left flank of the green movement had been arguing all along). (Klein 2014, 228)

Klein cites a report analyzing this failure by Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol to reinforce her general argument. “She concluded that a major barrier to success was the absence of a mass movement applying pressure from below. ‘To counter fierce political opposition, reformers will have to build organizational networks across the country’” (Ibid, 229). Indeed, the lack of a strong movement to apply grassroots pressure from below can arguably explain a host of other policy failures. On the international stage, the United States has a consistent and well-documented record of weakening and thwarting major international approaches to climate change, from the establishment of the UNFCCC to the Kyoto Protocol and Copenhagen Accord. More recently, U.S. president Donald Trump (2017) justified his administration’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, not only on the arguably false grounds that it imposed a burden to the American economy, but also on the relatively true grounds that the Agreement was weak to begin with.<sup>29</sup> Again, the powerful interests systematically weakening efforts to address

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed, more recently still, the Trump Administration has gotten to the point of arguing against fossil fuel regulations (specifically fuel efficiency standards) on grounds that it is already too late to avoid climate change (Nuccitelli 2018).

the climate problem when consequential political measures seem likely can then point to those weaknesses later to justify abandoning the measure when political conditions afford this possibility.

Ultimately, the complicity of some of the biggest environmental organizations in weakening the Paris Agreement has to be understood as an historical phenomenon. Although the world wanted a strong binding agreement in Paris, negotiators knew that this would require passage in the Republican-controlled U.S. House and Senate. The reason this task was impossible in 2015 (not unlike the 2009 failure in Copenhagen) has to be understood in the context of U.S. climate politics going back decades. This is a history that, as Klein details, implicates the co-option of major environmental groups to legitimize watered-down and industry-friendly measures, and more generally help solidify the ideological hegemony of a pro-business, anti-governmental logic. By aligning with economic and political forces *institutionally oriented* towards the logic of free market capitalism, “Big Green” helped legitimize the neo-liberal consolidation of power. They did so by smoothing over the contradiction between market fundamentalism and the consequences of accelerating carbon-intensive mass production and consumption without any built-in limits.

Beyond their role legitimizing their corporate and political partners at the top, perhaps the most consequential misstep of the professionalized climate movement centers on the low priority assigned to public engagement as a force for change. By trading the grassroots politics that brought success in earlier decades for a commitment to making the dominant system of socio-cultural institutions work for the climate, they arguably

bypassed the one institution, democracy, with the political potential to overcome the forces of institutionalized power.

If, instead of focusing on pragmatic solutions, the climate movement was more problem-driven, it could have engaged democratic motives for change by linking climate change to the systemic conflicts between ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ that affect people in other ways as well. More specifically, a systemic grasp of the climate issue firmly connected to the institutionalized centers of power pushing the neoliberal turn might have prompted a strategy for appealing to those *least* beholden to these institutions. Attention could have been oriented, for example, to the task of comprehensively making sense of what some ecological Marxists call the two contradictions of capitalism.<sup>30</sup> The first is a contradiction in social relations, most famously between the interest of capital and labor (where the latter could also implicate gender, race, and post-colonial nations). The second one, by contrast, is a contradiction in socio-ecological relations—that is, between the economic imperative for material accumulation and the need to sustainably regulate the “metabolism” of human exchanges with the natural world beyond them. There’s a structural connection between the domineering socio-ecological relations responsible for the environmental crisis and the domineering social relations responsible for growing disparities of wealth and power. When considering the structural conflicts of interest between the power elite served by this logic of domination and those marginalized by it, the potential for grassroots appeal could have been enormous. For instance, powerful coalitions and campaigns might have emerged early on to consistently draw out the

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<sup>30</sup>This influential concept was introduced by James O’Connor (1988).

contradictions between economic growth and the need to create a post-carbon economy, on the one hand, and the contradictions between neoliberal justifications for “trickle-down economics” and the practical material needs of the marginalized.<sup>31</sup>

Klein’s reading of climate failure, therefore, bears out Speth’s basic point that making the system work for the environment is likely doomed to fail precisely to the extent that environmental problems are systemic to begin with.<sup>32</sup> On the national scale, efforts to win over corporations and governments (despite systemic reasons for them to strongly resist such action) have consistently undermined possibilities for confronting the climate issue for what it is. Likewise, on the international stage, the technocratic and pragmatic approach culminating in the voluntary, non-binding agreement in Paris and its subsequent withdrawal by Trump have been severely compromised from the outset. Efforts to mollify the U.S. stance (exemplified by George H.W. Bush’s remark that “the American way of life is not up for negotiation” just as the landmark UNFCCC was being worked out in Rio de Janeiro (McKibben 2005)) has repeatedly invited efforts to stall, minimize, and thwart global action by the nation whose imperial power is firmly tied to the global fossil fuel economy.

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<sup>31</sup> As noted elsewhere in the dissertation, this has indeed occurred to a considerable degree in grassroots climate movements (particularly over the past decade or so under the rubric of climate justice), largely in reaction to what I’m now describing as climate technocracy and pragmatism. In the context of the present discussion, however, I would argue that these groups largely emerged after the “Big Green” climate movement (going back decades) already solidified their dominant position as the most visible and politically mobilized voice for climate response.

<sup>32</sup> Rosewarne, Goodman, and Pearse (2013, 36) corroborate Klein and Speth’s main argument by detailing the political failure of “climate pragmatism” at the state level in Australia, which focused “almost entirely on winning government over to the cause of meeting the challenge of climate change.” With little to no focus on mobilizing the grassroots, environmental organizations had to be content with what little they could get. As with corporations, moreover, governments were shown to freely use environmental organization to legitimize their stance on the climate when public concern loomed, and just as easily drop them as soon as the public was distracted.

In the final analysis and on the whole, then, I argue that climate technocracy and pragmatism have long failed to the extent that they miss the systemic nature of the climate problem. Under the assumption that the dominant system of institutions can be made to work for the climate, technocratic and pragmatic approaches tend to be politically oriented towards convenient solutions that ultimately protect the status quo, as opposed to the inconvenient demands for systemic change imposed by the climate problem itself. Indeed, as Klein (2014, 210) explains, this tendency was evident in the “Big Green” climate movement from the start:

The 1990s was the key decade when the contours of the climate battle were being drawn—when a collective strategy for rising to the challenge was developed...It was also the period when Big Green become most enthusiastically pro-corporate, most committed to a low-friction model of social change in which everything had to be ‘win-win’...This alignment of economic interests...fundamentally shaped how these green groups conceived of the climate challenge from the start. Global warming was not defined as a crisis being fueled by overconsumption, or by high emissions industrial agriculture, or by car culture, or by a trade system that insists that vast geographical distances do not matter—root causes that would have demanded changes in how we live, work, eat, and shop. Instead, climate change was presented as a narrow technical problem with no end of profitable solutions within the market system.

With attention to the structures of institutional power, framing climate change as a technocratic issue makes sense to pragmatists seeking political traction on this issue. For those positioned to find their motivational bearings in the system of institutions that support them (either as powerful stakeholders and decision-makers in the fossil fuel economy or as a movement committed to political access), we can expect forms of thought and action that frame the climate problem from the perspective of solutions made “practical” *by* that system. When judged against the historical and material demands of the climate problem, however, these politically “realistic” approaches are, in fact, unrealistic. Technocratic and pragmatic “solutions” that work comfortably for regimes of

power under industrial capitalism do not work for the climate itself precisely because the institutions supporting the former are in fact systemic to the latter.

Insofar as climate technocracy and pragmatism jump too quickly from problem to solution, this is largely because the problem has been interpreted *politically* from the vantage point of solutions acceptable to powerful stakeholders. Accordingly, my thesis is that adequately responding to the climate situation we find ourselves in today calls for fundamental shift in orientation from the demands for politically pragmatic solutions to the more pressing demands imposed by the systemic nature of the climate problem. Required at this stage, in other words, is a shift from an ostensibly “solution-driven” approach institutionally motivated to preserve status quo existence to a “problem-driven” logic of systemic change genuinely committed to challenging it.

As mentioned above, this challenge can be loosely defined as a collective action problem, where the task at hand is to *ethically* motivate a common response to the climate problem for what it is. Ethics, after all, generally concerns doing the right thing, even—and perhaps especially—in tricky situations when this is particularly challenging. Furthermore, recall, I suggested that ethical action had to be collectively oriented across three structural vectors that I categorized as political, cultural, and social in nature. This and the following section concern the politics of orienting collective action (the final two sections focus on the cultural and social dimensions of this challenge). This section was intended to introduce the political logic of climate change, specifically by arguing that the consistent failures of climate technocracy and pragmatism ultimately represent institutional failure in a sweeping sense. Insofar as the dominant approaches to climate change described above are top-down in orientation, it has been implied at various points

that the systemic nature of this issue calls for a bottom-up politics (presumably at a reasonable distance from the corrupting influences of institutionalized power). In the next section, however, I consider Chris Cuomo's analysis of climate responsibility as an explicit argument for this position. With attention to systemic power relations, she argues that a politically viable response to the climate problem calls for ethically motivated grassroots movements for climate justice.

### ***Politically Orienting Ethical Motivation***

Chris Cuomo's essay "Climate Change, Vulnerability, and Responsibility" is considerably unique in the climate literature for its account of responsibility at the intersection of ethics and politics. Sensitive to the kind of institutionalized power structures discussed above, she makes a compelling case for ethical responsibility on political grounds.

Cuomo's argument largely rests on her distinction between "bearing responsibility" and "taking responsibility" for climate change. "To bear responsibility is to be considered morally responsible by common ethical norms [e.g., 'do no harm' or 'polluter pays'], but to *take* responsibility is to accept responsibility and act on it" (Cuomo 2011, 699). Beginning with the former, questions about who *bears* responsibility for climate change must take leave from the fact that this issue was "manufactured in a crucible of inequality" (Ibid, 693). For example, she notes that Europe is historically responsible for 30.6% of emissions, while the United States is responsible for 27.2% (Ibid, 697). It is no coincidence that these countries have long been the centers of colonialism and imperialism culminating in the industrial revolution and economic

globalization more recently. Furthermore, the harms caused by climate change do not affect everyone equally across demographics. Considering the histories of exploitation that still structure power relations today, it's important to acknowledge that harms generally accrue to those on the receiving end of this exploitation (this point largely marks the *raison d'être* of the climate justice movement). For Cuomo, therefore, determining who bears responsibility first requires distinguishing different social levels. A good place to begin, as her essay suggests, is to consider how we should hold individuals, communities, corporations, and governments responsible for the harms caused by greenhouse gas emissions.

Beginning with individuals, Cuomo says that citizens should bear *some* responsibility for their emissions. Yet, in contrast to thinkers that center attention on individual responsibility, she argues that resting on this position is problematic. First, there is the “insufficiency problem.” In the United States, where per capita emissions are highest, emissions from individuals (i.e., from the residential and citizen transportation sectors) account for only a little more than a third of national emissions. Focusing responsibility on individuals is problematic for other reasons as well. Namely, citizens have limited options to dramatically reduce consumption, they generally lack faith in the government to address this problem democratically, and many are in denial or find themselves confused about the science.<sup>33</sup> All things considered, therefore, relying on individuals to bear responsibility is neither ethically justifiable nor politically feasible.

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<sup>33</sup> This is thanks, in no small part, to industry-funded and government-supported misinformation campaigns. See the next chapter for a psychological treatment of denial (Oreskes and Conway 2010).

Cuomo argues instead that “meta-emitters” (corporations and governments) ought to bear most responsibility for climate change. And yet, one knows from political experience that industries are immune to ethical arguments, and thus unlikely to voluntarily reduce their own emissions on ethical grounds alone. If corporations refuse to bear responsibility, it falls on governments to regulate them. Absent public pressure, however, nothing can force governments to do so. Indeed, it is evident that there are powerful institutional incentives for them to *not* take decisive action (particularly for those beholden to fossil fuel interests). Governments themselves, moreover, also bear responsibility—both directly, as in the emissions sourced in the military, and indirectly in the form of policy decisions made past and present. Yet, with few exceptions, most governments (especially the worst offenders) don’t appear willing to bear this kind of responsibility. Under these conditions, allocating responsibility for climate change technocratically is much safer politically.

At this point, Cuomo goes on to suggest that it now falls back on citizens to address this problem by pressuring governing bodies to hold industries (and themselves) accountable. And yet, didn’t she argue that individuals shouldn’t be expected to bear the burdens of responsibility for climate change? Here we return to the distinction between bearing and taking responsibility. Citizens don’t “bear” primary responsibility, but if they *care* about this issue then they should be compelled to “take” responsibility. This is the crux of her argument (indeed, the essential challenge of *taking responsibility* for the climate situation is central to this dissertation project as a whole). All things considered, “an ethically motivated minority must effectively act on their caring while also making it

contagious through the creation of a more effective political will” to compel meta-emitters to appropriately bear responsibility for climate change (Cuomo 2011, 708).

Cuomo’s argument thus suggests that an effective response to the climate problem has to be ethically motivated and politically oriented at the level of community action—presumably at a safe remove from the centers of institutionalized power where, as I suggest above, “solutions” are largely motivated to preserve, not challenge, business as usual. More specifically, what I have called a problem-driven response to climate change requires grassroots climate movements politically oriented to achieve systemic change from the bottom-up—and made “contagious” by those ethically motivated to take responsibility for an issue they deeply care about.

In my view, Cuomo’s ethico-political argument is compelling (I personally can’t imagine effectively protecting the future from the more dangerous extremes of climate change in any other way). But the implications of this position are daunting. It’s true that people tend to be inspired by those who are felt to take deep responsibility for something they genuinely believe in. As I hope will become increasingly clear as the dissertation proceeds, however, a politically viable movement truly committed to taking responsibility for an issue that is global and intergenerational in scope and systemic in depth would require a kind of mass-scale moral fervor like nothing we’ve ever seen. To be viable, truly problem-driven climate movements would have to be powerful enough to shake the institutional infrastructure of history itself.

When reflecting on the kind of “contagion” needed to authentically confront the climate problem and looking for some kind of historical precedent to grasp the ineffable magnitude of this task, one might imagine the early Christian revolt against the Roman

Empire. Indeed, the religious language of faith and transcendence seems oddly appropriate to describing the challenges of ethically motivating a grassroots response to systemic climate change. Creating a truly just, post-carbon global economy, for instance, would seem to require enough confidence in future possibilities to inspire people *en masse* to take up the cause of climate justice—without exactly knowing what this future holds. Somehow, the givens of existing political realities (in which reason furnishes little hope once it scratches the surface) must be fully taken up and transcended with enough doubt to keep us honest but not enough to surrender our commitments. Paul Tillich (1957) defines faith in existential terms as a state of “being ultimately concerned,” a concern that directs life in some ultimate way. It demands the “total personality” to critically question, work through, and ultimately transcend the comforting “false ultimates” that one is socialized to identify with (like economic measures of the good life) (Ibid). More than this, a radical courage would be needed to discover and commit oneself to this object of ultimate concern without ultimate assurances. Given the sheer magnitude and scope of the challenges ahead, taking responsibility for climate change will certainly require an ethical commitment of this depth to create, grow, and most importantly to sustain a truly problem-driven movement at the grassroots.

Unfortunately, as I discuss more fully in the following chapter, serious reflection of this kind in response to Cuomo’s argument isn’t likely to go this far. At some point, probably not long after it begins, one becomes conscious of a felt reality—that a considerable percentage of people in the industrialized nations most responsible for climate change don’t appear to sufficiently care about this issue compared to others—certainly not enough to motivate people *en masse* to internalize the deep implications of

this systemic problem.<sup>34</sup> Cuomo’s argument gives citizens that *already* care an avenue of climate response by pointing in the direction of grassroots activism. But without substantial levels of public care for activists to work with in the first place, building an ethically contagious grassroots movement massive enough to touch the climate problem doesn’t seem likely. Indeed, there are structural barriers to ethical responsibility on this issue not addressed in her argument. On this point, as discussed in the following section, climate ethicists Dale Jamieson and Stephen Gardiner can help fill in some important gaps (yet, as I shall argue, this “help” is needed in the other direction as well).

To recap, after examining the failures of climate technocracy and pragmatism, I turned to Cuomo to argue that the political barriers to a problem-driven response are systemic to institutionalized structures of power. On these grounds, Cuomo argues that ethical motivation is needed to overcome these political barriers. Considering Jamieson and Gardiner’s accounts of the collective action problem, however, there is reason to believe that the barriers to motivating ethical responsibility for climate change are equally systemic in depth. That is, beyond the political barriers to a problem-driven response addressed by Cuomo’s argument, there are *cultural* and *social* barriers to fully caring about the climate issue to begin with. These are the second and third structural vectors of the collective action problem that have to be considered before one can reasonably hope for the kind of grassroots movements called for by Cuomo’s essay. To anticipate my own position, I argue that Jamieson and Gardiner offer comprehensive accounts of the cultural and social barriers to ethical responsibility, but in contrast to Cuomo they are less

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<sup>34</sup> According to recent polling, Americans have become more concerned about climate change but they still rank this issue 15<sup>th</sup> on a list of 28 issues that “registered voters say will influence their vote for Congress in 2018” (Ballew, et al. 2018).

convincing on the relatively political question of *overcoming* these barriers. Nevertheless, they open up important philosophical questions about the relation between institutions and motivation in the face of a systemic problem like climate change—questions that bring focus to the next chapter of the dissertation and those that follow.

### ***Cultural and Social Barriers to Ethically Motivating Collective Action***

In light of the political record of consistent failure discussed earlier, reflecting on the structural challenges of climate response would seem to naturally invite basic questions of human motivation in the face of a problem like this. Already in 1992, in an essay presaging the field of study known as climate ethics, Dale Jamieson offers a critique of technocratic or “management” approaches as inherently ill-suited to confronting this particular issue. That economic analyses and prescriptions have become hegemonic in policy discourses, he writes, stems from a widespread assumption that this framework “provides the only social theory that accurately represents human motivation” (Jamieson 2010a, 80). On the premise that human motivation is egocentric, classical economic theory suggests that the climate problem can be managed in carrot-and-stick fashion by incentivizing solutions and disincentivizing problematic behaviors. Yet, in general agreement with Gardiner, Jamieson argues that the unique characteristics of climate change render technocratic approaches premised on this view “doomed to failure” (Ibid, 82). Although he doesn’t explicitly identify climate change as a collective action problem until later, his early critique of technocracy reframes the climate challenge as an ethical challenge where questions of motivation take on new meaning.

There are three basic characteristics that make climate change a collective action, rather than technocratic, problem. As Gardiner (2010, 88) formulates them, these are:

- Dispersion of causes and effects
- Fragmentation of agency
- Institutional inadequacy

First, the causes and effects of climate change are dispersed over vast scales of space and time. Technocratic approaches assume that problems can be clearly identified and then solved by enacting policies that appropriately channel behavior. The U.S. Clean Air and Clean Water acts, for instance, identified problems directly (e.g., factory pipes or smokestacks pouring untreated waste into waterways/atmosphere) and enacted regulations to reform these practices. Unlike these instances of “point source pollution,” however, the climate problem is different in kind. Emissions, the direct cause of climate change, have been accumulating in the atmosphere for generations and are now thoroughly diffused on a global scale. If we understand the indirect cause of climate change more broadly as an expression of “the very character of a global civilization that has been built on fossil fuels,” as Dryzek, *et al.* put it, it is clear that this diffusion of causes is systemic indeed. The effects of climate change, moreover, are perhaps even more globally and intergenerationally diffuse. The specific impacts of this problem are impossible to predict at the regional levels of policy prescription, and the sheer diversity of impacts (agriculture, fishing, forestry, tourism, ecosystems, insurance, patterns of urbanization, etc.) make it impossible to aggregate in the form of policy prescriptions.

The second major characteristic concerns the diffusion or fragmentation of agents causing climate change. Technocratic approaches assume that the agents responsible for the problem can be clearly identified and held responsible. In the case of water and air

pollution, producers in certain industries can be targeted and regulated to solve the problem. Climate change, however, thoroughly implicates the entire system of production and consumption (along with military practices, private land development, and so on.). Agency isn't by any means *equally* diffused across nations, industries, classes, and individuals. But responsibility for this problem is nevertheless too systemic in depth and too global and intergenerational in scope to identify and address technocratically. The harms created by droughts, floods, hurricanes, glacier melt, crop failures, submerging coastal cities and island states, species extinctions, and geopolitical resource conflicts will be (and already are) caused by innumerable agents simply living their normal lives: "Instead of a single cause, millions of people will have made imperceptible causal contributions—by driving cars, cutting trees, using electricity, and so on" (Jamieson 2010a, 83). Not only are these countless contributions diffused around the globe, but the correlation between the causes and effects of climate change is nonlinear (chaotic) and takes place over a period of multiple generations. In this sense, Jamieson submits, "Today we face the possibility that the global environment may be destroyed, yet no one will be responsible. This is a new problem" (Ibid, 84).

So far, Jamieson and Gardiner roundly agree on the general characteristics (or logic) of climate change rendering this issue a collective action problem. Confronting this issue for what it is demands a collective enterprise defined by the exigencies of the problem at hand. Specifically, both conclude (like Cuomo) that ethical motivation is called for in the face of institutional failure to appropriately orient a common response. Beyond this general consensus, however, a significant philosophical difference emerges between them concerning the relation between institutions and motivation. Although both

argue that existing institutions are “inadequate” (the third characteristic), I submit that Jamieson predominantly refers to *cultural* institutions as the main barriers to ethical action, while Gardiner’s analysis centers on *social* institutions. In my view, cultural and social institutions regulate distinct motivations at the collective level, as I explain below in the process of distinguishing Jamieson and Gardiner’s analysis of the collective action problem.<sup>35</sup> On this basis, I argue that, on the whole, Jamieson’s reading of the collective action problem largely expresses something like a cultural theory of human motivation, while Gardiner tends toward what might be called a social/practical theory of motivation.

Jamieson, to begin with, claims that traditional cultural institutions constitute the central barriers to ethically motivating collective action on climate change insofar as they are maladapted to registering the global and intergenerational characteristics of this problem. Specifically, “our dominant value system is inadequate and inappropriate for guiding our thinking about global environmental problems” (Ibid, 83). Americans and other Westerners are not culturally prepared to *make sense* of the moral imperatives of climate change, and for this reason are not seriously motivated to respond to this problem. Our system of values, he notes, “evolved in low-population-density and low-technology societies, with seemingly unlimited access to land and other resources” (Ibid). Today, however, the opposite is true. “Since the end of World War II, humans have attained a kind of power that is unprecedented in history... While once particular societies had the power to upset the natural processes that made their lives and cultures possible,

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<sup>35</sup> A philosophical account of this distinction is offered more fully in the final chapter where I draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological conception of “the relation of motivation.” However, for the purposes of introducing the institutional barriers to ethical motivation (i.e., problem-driven collective action on climate change), it will suffice at this point to offer a summary treatment of this distinction.

now people have the power to alter the fundamental global conditions that permitted human life to evolve and that continue to sustain it” (Ibid, 82). Against this normative background, climate change is an ethical absurdity.

Societies tend to rely on largely unconscious ethical paradigms evolved culturally over time in order to recognize and address collective problems in common. In the process of developing, moreover, “inconsistencies and incoherencies” in a system of values often emerge, and dialogue and debate ensues to smooth them out (Ibid, 83). To the extent that these attempts generally prove successful, an internally consistent and mutually assumed paradigm of ethical behavior can emerge to guide action on problems of common concern. Hence, the value system dominant today (“coincident with the rise of capitalism” (Ibid)) is predominantly oriented towards problems that surface in the practical contexts of life in capitalist societies—not, one could add, with problems systemic to capitalism itself. This is why people today generally struggle to find traction on the ethical implications of this issue and thus respond appropriately.

Jamieson concludes his seminal essay by intimating a kind of cultural remedy by turning to virtue ethics. More recently, he expanded his position in *Reason in a Dark Time*. His basic argument hasn’t changed since 1992, but he goes into much more detail about his positive proposal for addressing what he now labels “the world’s largest collective action problem” (Jamieson 2014, 4). Ultimately, a cultural paradigm shift expressing “an ethics for the Anthropocene” is called for to help people fully make sense of the deeper implications of climate change and suggest viable avenues for response (Ibid, 186). Given the cultural barriers to collective action on climate change, new forms of meaning and purpose are needed to overcome them as we transition to a new era. And

this rests with cultivating new values and “green virtues” to express them, the highest among them being a “respect for nature” that places human beings in partnership with the nonhuman world (Ibid, 188). Values and virtues are cultural constructions, he maintains, and as a system they afford the common ground needed to motivate collective action. “Unless we develop new values and conceptions of responsibility, we will have enormous difficulty in motivating people to respond to this problem” (Ibid, 84).

Given Jamieson’s diagnosis of the barriers to collective action together with his prescription for overcoming them, his reading of the basic challenges of climate response arguably rest on a cultural theory of human motivation. The term “culture” is difficult to clearly pin down in a formulaic definition. But as I suggest in the dissertation introduction, I treat cultural institutions as the normative structures of meaning held in common with others charged with putting things into perspective *a priori* (at various levels of generality). The focus on concepts, values, virtues, sensibilities, and ideals centering Jamieson’s analysis thus find expression against a common background of historically “constructed” assumptions orienting how people make sense of the world and their lives in it moving forward. In the furthest reaches, this larger perspective expresses an ontological order and historical project collectively inherited from the past, expressed in the present, and oriented towards a future waiting to be realized.<sup>36</sup> At this background level, deep assumptions about, say, the cosmological essence of the world together with the nature and destiny of human existence affords comprehension to a number of

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<sup>36</sup> Although Jamieson doesn’t explicitly address this, a given cultural heritage isn’t uniformly inherited by everyone in a given society. Differences in past experience (vis-à-vis ethnicity, gender, class, religion, etc.) mean that present experience and future expectations are lived differently. To Jamieson’s point, however, it’s also true that the *dominant* cultural norms effect everyone to some degree or another.

relatively specific assumptions closer to the surface—including views about human behavior, the direction of history, the human relation to nature, the good life, the good society, and so on.<sup>37</sup> Hence, when Jamieson argues that the climate problem cannot be technocratically managed because this issue challenges how we fundamentally relate to nature and to each other, the depth of this challenge for him is cultural in this sense.

As Gardiner (2013) suggests, what is most significant (and controversial) in Jamieson’s analysis is the philosophical premise that normative structures of meaning are the decisive factors motivating action. Drawing on the vocabulary of metaethics to account for the philosophical differences between them, Gardiner (Ibid) argues (and Jamieson concurs) that his position assumes an *internal* connection between “justifying reasons” to act ethically and “motivating reasons” to do so. Gardiner explains this position, known as “internalism,” as follows: “[I]f one really appreciates a justifying reason, then one will experience a corresponding motivating reason to act accordingly” (Ibid, 3). Addressing “the problem of motivation” in one of his essays, Jamieson affirms this assumption:

Even if what I have said is correct [vis-à-vis justifying reasons for climate action], a problem may linger. Morality is fundamentally directed toward action. Many would say that it seems clear that we are not motivated to address this problem. What is the point of seeing climate change as posing moral questions if we are not motivated to act?...However, I believe that once we appreciate climate change as a moral problem, this view is virtually irresistible....Finally, I think it is a plain fact that climate change poses moral questions...[and] surely there is some connection between seeing an act as morally right and performing it. (Jamieson 2010b, 277)

Following this point to its logical conclusions, it seems that questions of motivation here hinge on the extent to which climate change is cognitively *recognized* as a moral issue.

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<sup>37</sup> See the next chapter where I discuss Carolyn Merchant’s analysis of the ‘machine’ as a root metaphor to articulate an ontological order and the meta-narrative of ‘progress’ as an historical project.

In contradistinction to Jamieson, Gardiner's analysis of the institutional barriers to collective action is informed by a different philosophy of motivation. He doesn't necessarily deny the cultural challenges of ethically responding to climate change, but his reading of the collective action problem takes the form of a practical ethics centered on the "structure of preferences" motivating certain decisions to act over others (Gardiner 2011, 337). Climate change ultimately presents us with a "perfect moral storm" of *practical* motives to ignore or rationalize away the ethical imperatives to act (Ibid, 30).

My thesis is this: The peculiar features of the climate change problem pose substantial obstacles to our ability to make the hard choices necessary to address it. Climate change is a perfect moral storm. One consequence of this is that even if the difficult ethical questions could be answered, we might still find it difficult to act. For the storm makes us extremely vulnerable to moral corruption. (Ibid, 88)

For Gardiner, then, an ability to answer "the difficult ethical questions" of climate response isn't enough to compel decisive action. This is because the "peculiar features" of the climate issue challenge our capacity to make concrete decisions in view of the practical consequences of doing so. What are these features? Recall that Jamieson and Gardiner generally agree that these include the "dispersion of causes and effects," the "fragmentation of agency," and "institutional inadequacy." Generally speaking, existing institutions are ill-equipped to address the systemic causes and effects of climate change and identify the agents responsibility for this problem accordingly. But significantly, as I mention above, "institutional inadequacy" means something quite different to each thinker. If, for Jamieson, the institutions structuring our system of values fail to give us the normative traction needed to make ethical sense of the climate issue, the more significant institutional barriers to collective action centering Gardiner's analysis are more social in function.

Ultimately, as I argue in the following section, Jamieson and Gardiner are both subject to a common point of criticism to the extent that each tends toward a reductive philosophy of collective motivation along the culture/society axis. Recall my claim made earlier that cultural and social institutions regulate distinct-yet-intertwined motives. I refer to social institutions as the general structures of coexistence orienting practical decision-making behavior at the individual level, and practical relations to the world of others and material nature more generally.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the economic and political institutions that focus Gardiner’s analysis are paradigmatic in this regard. Economically and politically motivated decisions tend to stand out as concretely situated. That is, they’re responsive to the “structure of preferences” that compel people to make practical decisions *in situ*. Thanks to the way capitalist societies are structured, for example, the bottom-line imperative motivating producers concerns maximizing profits in the face of competition, which typically means maximizing production and consumption over time. Specifically, they might be motivated in practice to attract investors, win over politicians to minimize “burdensome” regulations, and constantly market and advertise so that consumer demand keeps up with market demands to expand production (i.e., secure profit). Now individual producers might (due to upbringing, say) hold cultural values that would otherwise motivate them to avoid harming others or the environment. But given the practical exigencies of their concrete situation (structured by a “grow-or-die” system<sup>39</sup>), social motives to remain competitive are likely to outweigh any ethical

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<sup>38</sup> Perhaps one way to think about the distinction between culturally and socially motivated behavior is that the former concerns how behavior orients itself *to* the situation, while the latter speaks to the way behavior is oriented *by* the situation (and thus “practical” in this sense).

<sup>39</sup> This term is often employed by ecological Marxists to describe the growth imperative structuring the logic of capitalism as “a system based on a single motive—the perpetual accumulation of capital, and hence

motives to do the right thing in the event of a conflict. Indeed, cultural motives that interfere with economic or political survival are likely to wither away over time (beginning, perhaps, with a series of rationalizations to alleviate cognitive dissonance and culminating in justifying ideologies that become essential to class identity).

Now Gardiner doesn't explicitly offer a structural analysis of capitalism (like Marxists, for instance), but his focus on the practical barriers to ethical action structured by this and other social institutions is consistent. With respect to the practical barriers to decisive action on climate change, an essential problem for Gardiner is that economic and political institutions tend to motivate decisions that are myopic in space and time. When measured against the vast global and intergenerational horizons of the climate issue, the social purview of practical concern doesn't typically exceed national borders and the next generation. Gardiner (2011, 58) illustrates this by considering consumption practices: "I suspect that, given current institutions, there is a natural default position for human action; first, the main driver of the [climate] problem is the current consumption behavior of agents (especially individuals) in the global economic system; and second, such consumption is largely prompted by factors with a very limited temporal and spatial horizon." A similar point can be applied to political institutions: politicians are motivated to win elections by appealing to the immediate wishes of the voting public (and, especially in the U.S., attract wealthy donors with immediate wishes of their own), NGOs are often motivated to work pragmatically with politicians to maximize lobbying influence, and so on. Hence, the dominant institutions responsible for climate change

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economic growth without end" (Magdoff and Foster 2011, 8). For accounts of the structural contradiction between capital accumulation and environmental (socio-ecological) sustainability, see Blair (1994); Schnaiberg, Pellow, and Weinberg (2002); and Foster, Clark, and York (2010a and 2010c).

(and most essential to decisively confronting it) overwhelmingly motivate a “status quo bias” over moral imperatives for action (Ibid, 31). Particularly to the extent that national and international economies today are structurally dependent on cheap fossil fuels, those that benefit from—and are thus invested in—systems already in place are generally predisposed to actively resist basic challenges to it.

For Gardiner, then, failures to respond have less to do with our cultural ability to make ethical *sense* of climate change and more to do with the practical contingencies confronting people when decisions have to be made in view of the *consequences* of doing so. Importantly, the problem isn’t that ethical motives to challenge business as usual don’t exist, or that they are simply killed off by economic and political commitments to the status quo. In disagreement with Jamieson, he argues that, at some level, most people *are* in fact genuinely concerned about the threat of climate change, but “we lack the appropriate institutions to make these concerns effective” (Ibid, 10). If, for Jamieson, appropriate ethical motives don’t yet sufficiently exist (because, for historical reasons, they lack cultural traction), Gardiner suggests that such motives are held in suspension due to the lack of social space required to *express* felt concerns for the planet and future generations in practice. Climate change is a “perfect moral storm” because existing social institutions fail to register the practical logic of this global and intergenerational problem—and this is precisely what leaves us vulnerable to “moral corruption”<sup>40</sup> in the face of this grave threat. This corruption manifests in a number of ways (he mentions

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<sup>40</sup> It’s worth pointing out that the word “corruption” suggests that something has been infected or tainted *from without* (and one is culpable to the extent that this is allowed to happen). Perhaps Jamieson’s view, by contrast, affords more innocence in that people are, for historical reasons that largely exceed them, culturally unprepared to respond.

distraction, complacency, unreasonable doubt, selective attention, delusions, pandering, false witness, and hypocrisy), but in each case it tends to be concretely situated.

In lieu of reforming ethical sensibilities in the form of a cultural paradigm shift, the ethical task of climate response begins by recognizing that we've been institutionally corrupted and then "call on other motivations, and in particular moral motivations" to overcome this corruption (Ibid, 62).

If the climate problem is caused by the fact that certain kinds of motivations and institutions dominate current decision making, then one remedy would be to call on other motivations, and work out how to generate institutions that would make them operative. In particular, suppose that it is short-term, consumption oriented motivations, as registered through the market system, that cause the climate change problem; then, the solution might be to engage motivations with a longer time-horizon and wider purview, including moral motivations for intergenerational justice and respect for nature. Nothing in the assumptions of the perfect moral storm says that such motivations do not exist, nor that they are inferior to their rivals. Instead, the main point seems to be that if they do exist, these motivations have not yet been made manifest in decision making, or at least sufficiently manifest to challenge their competitors....If this is correct, awareness of the perfect moral storm analysis—knowing what the problem is—may play an important role in encouraging solutions. If we are alerted to...the prospects for moral corruption, we can be on our guard. Sometimes, 'sunlight is the best antiseptic'. (Ibid, 61)

Importantly, overcoming moral corruption on Gardiner's account appears to rest on a *competition* between social (economic, political) motives and ethical motives. He entertains Jamieson's proposition that we need to engage moral motivations oriented by a respect for nature, for instance. But he quickly follows this up with his "main point" that "these motivations have not yet been made manifest in decision making." Insofar as ethical motives are needed to outcompete "their rivals," confronting systemic climate change ultimately requires new institutions "to make them operative." Gardiner thus concludes his lengthy book *The Perfect Moral Storm* with the following: "our best chance of addressing climate change seems to rest with ethical motivations...If this is

correct, knowing how to channel such motivations into appropriate institutions, capture it in good moral theories, and support its development in people's characters and lives becomes a major task" (Ibid, 442).

Considering Cuomo's argument for caring citizens to take responsibility for the climate issue and get involved, Jamieson and Gardiner's analyses of the "unique characteristics" of the climate challenge are valuable. Offering a philosophical examination of the relation between institutions and motivation in this context, their work both corroborates and complicates Cuomo's political conclusion that a problem-driven response depends heavily on ethical motivation. Whether one's focus is cultural or social in orientation, ethical motivation is called for to the extent that the dominant institutions in the industrialized world motivate a status quo bias (exemplified by the political failures of climate technocracy and pragmatism). Yet, they also detail the cultural and social barriers to ethical motivation beyond naked power politics. Jamieson and Gardiner's treatments of the collective action problem on climate change doesn't compromise Cuomo's call for citizen care and responsibility, but they help elucidate the structural depths of this ethical challenge.

Beyond their diagnoses of the structural barriers to ethically motivating collective action, however, Jamieson and Gardiner's prescriptions for *overcoming* these barriers are less convincing compared to Cuomo. As discussed in the next section, my concerns are political and philosophical. With respect to the political forces orienting collective action, they lack a viable theory of systemic change. In particular, questions of institutionalized power and radical agency (central to Cuomo's analysis) remain underdeveloped in Jamieson and Gardiner. Moving from politics to ethics, Cuomo's argument begins by

examining the political conditions situating corporations, governments, communities, and individuals to the climate problem and concludes with a call for systemic change from the bottom up. Having identified the political locus of collective action at the communal level, she goes on to source political agency in ethically motivated citizens that care enough about the climate problem to take responsibility for it in the form of grassroots activism. Moving in the opposite direction, by contrast, Jamieson and Gardiner's ethical analyses don't adequately afford the political focus needed to work through the dynamics of power and agency in the face of a systemic problem like climate change.

In the concluding section to follow, I critically examine the political shortcomings of Jamieson and Gardiner's structural approach to the collective action problem. In my view, however, the political concerns detailed below ultimately implicate problematic philosophical assumptions about the nature of collective motivation, which then takes me to the next chapter where I offer a lifeworld perspective on the systemic barriers to climate response. As suggested above and elaborate below, their structural analyses largely rest on a reductive treatment of the relation between institutions and motivation along the culture/society axis. To the extent that their theories are, as I conclude, ill-equipped to fully explain the emergence of ethical responsibility and political agency in response to climate change, a philosophical alternative is required to handle the complexities of the task at hand. Ultimately, the structural vectors motivating collective action are irreducibly political, cultural, and social in orientation. If we hope to better understand what it is for people to take responsibility for systemic climate change *en route* to a problem-driven grassroots movement, we must identify the ethico-political locus of the collective action problem at the dynamic intersections of socio-cultural

existence. In the end, this requires a philosophical descent from a structural analysis of the political, cultural, and social barriers to collective action (each taken in abstraction) to a lifeworld analysis where these vectors intertwine in lived experiences and are actively taken up by various people in various situations.

### ***The Socio-cultural Background of Climate Motivation***

So far, the challenges of motivating a problem-driven response to climate change have been broadly framed as a collective action problem. Considering Cuomo, the principle challenge concerns ethically motivating grassroots political agency. Although Jamieson and Gardiner help clarify the systemic depths of this challenge by elaborating the cultural and social barriers to ethical motivation, their analyses encounter limits once questions turn to how ethical motivation (and ultimately political agency) might emerge in the face of these barriers. To the extent that they theoretically commit themselves to reductive treatments of institutions along the culture/society axis, their positions effectively assume one-sided philosophies of human motivation. Insofar as Jamieson tends toward a cultural theory of motivation that minimizes the significance of social institutions to motivate practical forms of behavior, the opposite tendency generally holds for Gardiner. In the final analysis, the structural barriers to climate action *and the challenges of overcoming them* require greater philosophical comprehension across the cultural, social, and political domains of intersubjective existence.

Problems with Jamieson's cultural premise become apparent at the end of *Reason In a Dark Time* where he offers practical suggestions for moving forward. In my view, his conclusions seem to reflect an uneasy mix between ethical calls for cultural revolution

and proposals firmly anchored to existing social institutions. I therefore worry, particularly in light of the failures of climate pragmatism, that his radical cultural analysis doesn't sit well with his relatively tame social proposals for practical action.

Collectively reorienting our relation to nature, Jamieson says, requires “new ways of thinking about the human project” that emphasizes what is “good” rather than what is “optimal” (Jamieson 2014, 234, 236). Moreover, he cites the rise of capitalism as an example of how revolutions in morality can occur, and claims: “Climate ethicists who seek to moralize behavior that may in some way contribute to climate change are revolutionaries, whether they see themselves in that way or not” (Ibid, 170). Given this stance, it may be surprising to see him appropriate the logic of market “mechanisms” in an effort to be pragmatic. For example, cap-and-trade and other “carbon pricing schemes” are endorsed as viable strategies on grounds of efficiency, while green technologies are called for to integrate adaptation measures with existing development objectives.

Yet, it's hard to imagine how substantial ethico-cultural change can occur by working within the very institutions that systematically reinforce the problematic worldview we're encouraged to move beyond. Although Jamieson acknowledges in passing the significance of institutional *roles*, he appears to underestimate the power of institutional *conditions* to situate people and their ethical decisions in practice. To the extent that material conditions already predispose people to a complimentary set of norms and values to help them make sense of their practical situations in life, hopes for a new worldview seem tenuous if these practical circumstances remain essentially the same as pragmatic measures are put forward. Worldviews do indeed motivate action, but what motivates the worldview?

Even if, for the sake of argument, the power of abstract ideas was such that collectives could transform their own worldview, it doesn't appear likely that such a transformation would be enough to confront the socio-economic and political forces driving climate change. Regardless of worldview intentions, for instance, the development objectives, energy prices, and technological developments mentioned by Jamieson are basic to capitalism as a "grow-or-die" system.<sup>41</sup> Consider the "Jevon's Paradox" as an example. It's been shown that overall energy consumption tends to *increase* with the development of more energy-efficient technologies, not decrease.<sup>42</sup> This is because, in practice, there are economic incentives to direct savings in energy costs (per unit) to expand overall production and ultimately maximize profit in a competitive marketplace (Foster, Clark, and York 2010b). If, as I maintain, fundamental *cultural* revisions require complementary *social* revisions, then any ethical theory calling for a new worldview should account for the institutional forces maintaining the old one. Worldviews are just cognitive articulations but deeply embodied and situated in practice.

Jamieson would explain that his social proposals are meant to be "practical and actionable," intended to guide only our "immediate responses to climate change" (Ibid, 236, 237). Until climate-friendly virtues and ethical paradigms emerge, we have to act, and we can only begin with institutions already in place. Given the pressing timeline of climate change, this point deserves attention. Even so, I submit, it's not enough to assume that social change follows from cultural change. Ultimately, the inertia of collective

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<sup>41</sup> See footnote 40 above for a brief introduction of the "grow-or-die" concept as it relates to the environment.

<sup>42</sup> The savings in energy costs per unit are typically directed to expanding overall production to remain competitive in response to market demands.

existence and history is socio-cultural in force and has to be treated as such. Hence, his concrete proposals still need to be made against the background of a compelling theory describing what *mediates* the relation between cultural and social change. Grappling with the collective action problem at hand, I argue, requires some account of how *socio-cultural* orders transform over time in response to systemic political problems.

Unfortunately, the only mention relevant to this in the book is that the “process of moralization is not well understood, but it is clear that both cognitive and affective experiences can be important in this regard” (Ibid, 176). The significance of social conditions motivating practical forms of behavior (and maintaining systemic power relations) doesn’t come up.

In my view, these critical considerations point to a basic flaw in the logic of culturalism that (in addition to similar concerns with Gardiner’s logic) ultimately leads me to the lifeworld alternative advanced in the next chapter. The priority given to personal forms of meaning, identity, and responsibility, on the one hand, and norms, values, and worldviews, on the other, appears insufficiently attuned to how transcultural material conditions influence the moral psychology of collective action. Again, Jamieson assumes that motivation to act stems from an ability to cognitively *recognize* problems as moral problems. To this extent, “internal” changes motivate “external” changes. This is why responding to climate change hinges on cultivating green virtues and ethical sensibilities to moralize behavior. In an essay detailing this argument, Jamieson (2010c, 325) quotes Alan Durning to make his point: “When most people see a large automobile and think first of the air pollution it causes, rather than the social status it conveys, environmental ethics will have arrived...[and] consumerism will be on the retreat.”

And yet, aren't we also motivated by the material conditions that concretely situate our lives *beyond* our inherited norms—even when they encourage decisions at odds with the moral paradigm that we otherwise identify with and default to? If, as I argue in the following chapter, personal and cultural identity is also bound to the social institutions that give order, security, and purpose to practical existence, to what extent can we expect people to unshackle themselves from such investments without suffering an identity crisis? Furthermore, a cultural logic of motivation appears ill-equipped to fully explain what we typically call economically and politically motivated decisions. Considering BP's move to end its high-on-promises "Beyond Petroleum" campaign, or the dramatic shift in the Republican Party from drafters of climate legislation (when the price of oil was high) to party-line "drill baby drill" denialists (when prices dropped), should one understand these actions as ethical shortcomings? Yes, but they also reflect the political economy that *situated* the practical decisions being made in the market and in Washington at this time (Hayes 2014).

In my view, a materialist critique along these lines is worth considering because Jamieson's (2014, 181) philosophical commitments appears to lead him to embrace a kind of lifestyle politics (focused on localized adaptation measures meaningful to community members), while grassroots political campaigns focused on issues systemic to social institution are largely dismissed. Again, however, and more to the point, a philosophical alternative is needed that draws attention to the *lived situation* of climate response where the cultural structures motivating normativity and the social conditions motivating practicality are thickly mediated in dynamic relation to each other.

If, as I contend, Jamieson’s treatment of the collective action problem suffers to the extent that he generally reduces social motivation to cultural motivation, Gardiner’s account tends to be reductive in the opposite direction. Here too, problems come into view in the (hasty) transition from diagnosis to prescription. A few years after analyzing the barriers to collective action in *The Perfect Moral Storm*, Gardiner published “A Call for a Global Constitutional Convention Focused on Future Generations” to confront the problem of overcoming these barriers. The purpose of the essay, he explains, is to address the “institution gap” with respect to registering moral concerns for future generations in the form of a contract. “In my view, the above line of reasoning [vis-à-vis the perfect moral storm] leads naturally to a more specific proposal: that we—concerned individuals, interested community groups, national governments, and transnational organizations—should initiate a call for a global constitutional convention” (Gardiner 2014, 7). Indeed, the virtue of the convention is that “it is based in a deep political reality” that “acknowledges the problem as it is, both specific and general, and calls attention to the heart of that problem, including the failures of the current system, the need for an alternative, and the background issue of responsibility” (Ibid, 8). Finally, the proposal is intended to be “comprehensive” and yet “non-alienating” and actionable in order to facilitate a “wide and overlapping political consensus, at least among those who share intergenerational concerns” (Ibid).

It is significant, in my view, that Gardiner’s prescription for collective action on climate change should take the form of a contract. As a tradition in political philosophy, contract theory tends to express certain assumptions about human motivation that arguably minimize (if not bracket out entirely) the cultural elements of behavior.

Analyzing “agents” as decision-makers reasoning through the contingencies of a given situation and negotiating competing interests, Gardiner seems to embody this tradition by treating the challenges of motivating collective action as a practical problem of coordinating social behavior. Whether expressed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, or John Rawls, once this classic materialist—and ultimately mechanistic—view of human nature is accepted, the next step is to engineer a system of external restraints and enabling rights (enforced by a binding authority) to channel competing interests for a greater good. Garrett Hardin, Gardiner (2011, 29) notes, calls this “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon.” As Gardiner (2014, 8) explains, for instance, a constitutional system should be conceived as “a set of norms (rules, principles or values) creating, structuring, and possibly defining the limits of, government power or authority.”<sup>43</sup>

Yet, what would compel governments or any other decision-making body to accept such a contract? The political consensus sought after is certainly imaginable when beginning with those who *already* “share intergenerational concerns.” Yet, to the extent that the economic and political implications of climate change deeply challenge the matrix of established institutions maintaining existing structures of power, it’s difficult to imagine why those in a position to address the “institution gap” concretely would be motivated to do so. Ultimately, if social institutions motivate problematic behavior (moral corruption), and this calls for strengthening and spreading moral motivation to

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<sup>43</sup> If we contrast Gardiner’s use of Hardin’s “mutual coercion” description to support his proposal for a social contract with Jamieson’s invocation of Alan Durning to support his calls for a cultural paradigm shift, their philosophical differences become clear. For Durning, recall, once environmental ethics is publicly adopted, “consumerism will be on the retreat.”

implement new institutions capable of registering existing concerns about the climate, one is left wondering how the whole process gets off the ground.

The answer, for Gardiner, appears to rest on becoming conscious of one's corruption. "If we cannot wake ourselves from our dogmatic slumber (and it is convenient for us not to waken), then...humanity is heading for global tragedy" (Gardiner 2011, 440). Consistent with Jamieson's cognitivist assumptions, then, Gardiner believes that ethical enlightenment on the objective problem marks a critical first step. The question dividing them, of course, concerns *how* to motivate this. Rather than calling for a cultural paradigm shift, Gardiner implies that such enlightenment begins with a rational confrontation with one's practical situation by sharply juxtaposing what one is institutionally motivated to do with the moral implications of this behavior.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps this view is made most explicitly when justifying his use of game theory to analyze the social barriers to collective action: "In some circumstances, [game theory] can elucidate the exact structure of our wanting to look the other way, and so serve as a guide to help us escape hypocrisy. This, I hope, is the normative impact of the current analysis" (Ibid, 62). It would take a good argument indeed, however, to convince readers that existing moral concerns—held in suspension, as it were, without institutional support—would be strong enough (once afforded practical expression) to inaugurate the monumental task of

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<sup>44</sup>The problem typical with accounts that focus too strongly on the motivating power of social structures to determine behavior is that they usually struggle to explain social change. This problem is captured in Marx's critique of traditional materialism. Those who hold that external conditions are the primary determinants of behavior (sometimes in an effort to explain public passivity when social change is needed), typically assume that galvanizing the public requires educating them on these conditions. As Marx (1978, 144) points out following Rousseau, however, this logic fails to explain who or what "educates the educator" (and what it really does is "divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society." Furthermore, education assumes a cultural background of norms and values against which things make sense in the first place.

creating new institutions powerful enough to compete with motives bent on protecting institutions systemic to the problem.

The processes by which the ethical implications of the climate problem are internalized by those exposed to his structural analysis remain unclear. On the whole and in direct opposition to Jamieson's position, there is a consistent thread in Gardiner's analysis that ethical motives for a problem-driven response must be *extrinsically* motivated. This philosophical impasse between the "internal" and the "external" runs through Gardiner's (and Jamieson's) formulations.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, a lifeworld approach to the collective action problem finds promise in this respect as well, since the very structures of lived experience mediating cultural and social motives in dynamic relation and without priority also mediate the 'internal' and 'external' more generally. Gardiner (2011, 243), for instance, often points out that "humanity as a whole is in the grip of profound political inertia" as evidence of the perfect moral storm of corruption. However, there are cultural elements *intrinsically* motivating this inertia that he (particularly via game theory) methodologically brackets out for the sake of practical analysis. When confronting a collective problem like climate change, *a priori* cultural assumptions influence what generally *counts* as sensible and practical, and thus rational. Consider, for example, that,

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<sup>45</sup> Gardiner's tendency to prioritize "extrinsic" over "intrinsic" motives finds expression beyond—but is consistent with—his perfect moral storm analysis "as a guide to help us escape hypocrisy." In "Are We the Scum of the Earth?," for instance, he begins with the premise that people have a strong desire to avoid negative moral evaluations (Gardiner 2012). Focusing on "categories of negative ethical appraisal to which [moral] failure makes us susceptible, including those of tarnishing, marring, and blighting evils" (Ibid, 243), he contends that morally criticizing inaction should have ample "motivational efficacy" (Ibid, 242). "Not only are tarnishing, blighting, and marring serious matters, but they accrue directly to those who commit wrongs rather than to their victims. Hence, they have the potential to exert a strong pull on agents" (Ibid, 252). With respect to questions of motivation, this strategy of exposing vice to instigate ethical action sharply contrasts with Jamieson's call for "green virtues" to inspire it. For Jamieson, climate ethics is about finding meaning and joy in the Anthropocene as we culturally transition to a new era. Conceived as "mechanisms that provide motivation to act" (Jamieson 2014, 186), a focus on cultivating virtues promises to "restore in us a sense of agency" (Ibid, 200).

particularly in challenging situations riddled with ambiguity, the dividing line between “realistic” and “idealistic” responses largely hinge on common—and commonly unconscious—assumptions about human nature. Consider, for instance, those that hold Hobbesian assumptions with little time for the wishful thinking of “romantic” or “pie-in-the-sky” idealists. For them, the very idea that public citizens could be sufficiently moved by the future global and ecological implications of climate change to voluntarily gather into grassroots collectives and change the course of history must seem to many like a direct violation of human nature. So why should we expect people to take Gardiner’s constitutional convention seriously as a practical way forward without focusing just as strongly on working through the “common sense” assumptions that make it *seem* impractical upon reception? In the climate context, as Jamieson points out, egocentric and anthropocentric assumptions about human motivation are particularly insidious in this regard. In contradistinction to Jamieson’s cultural analysis, Gardiner draws attention to the way these assumptions are embodied in the practical contexts of social experience, particularly when consequential economic and political decisions must be made. But, of course, it’s equally true that egocentrism and anthropocentrism have a deep religious and philosophical history sedimented in the unconscious background of common sense. In this regard, assumptions buried this deeply are *brought to* the situation, and in some contexts they can be decisive in determining one’s response to it. Hence, holding egocentric and anthropocentric assumptions of human nature *in advance*, “common sense” alone would immediately prohibit many from taking Gardiner’s contract seriously as a “practical” response in the first instance.

The cultural significance of *perceived* legitimacy is relevant to this point as well. As Klein points out, cultural prejudices are routinely manipulated ideologically to define practicality in terms that serve powerful interests—especially when systemic problems like climate change emerge that, if squarely addressed, could threaten those interests. With the help of think tanks, lobbyists, mass media, etc., corporate and political meaning brokers routinely tap into the cultural wells of common sense to cultivate ideologies that accentuate egocentric and anthropocentric assumptions of political realism to ensure business as usual. “What,” Klein (Ibid, 18) asks, “is really preventing us from putting out the fire that is threatening to burn down our collective house?”

I think the answer is far more simple than many have led us to believe: we have not done the things that are necessary to lower emissions because those things fundamentally conflict with deregulated capitalism, the reigning ideology for the entire period we have been struggling to find a way out of this crisis...[Hence,] it is our great collective misfortune that the scientific community made its decisive diagnosis of the climate threat at the precise moment when those elites were enjoying more unfettered political, cultural, and intellectual power than at any point since the 1920s. (Ibid)

For Klein, egocentric and anthropocentric tendencies aren’t motivated by social institutions alone (nor, for that matter, by cultural institutions alone). These assumptions also have an ideological component that influences the perceived legitimacy—and thus motivating power—of social institutions and behaviors at a given time. Addressing egocentrism in particular, she writes that the “denigration of collective action and veneration of the profit motive have infiltrated virtually every government on the planet, every major media organization, every university, our very souls...somewhere inside each of us dwells a belief in their central lie—that we are nothing but selfish, greedy, self-gratifying machines (Ibid, 62).” Hence, the politics of collective action certainly begins by problematizing egocentric “values and goals such as achievement, money,

power, status, and image” as anathema to collective action (Ibid, 60). But instead of elucidating the “exact structure of preferences” motivating inaction in practice and calling for practical solutions to channel ethical motivation in the form of a contract, Klein argues that an ideological shift towards cooperative sensibilities and values is required to redefine what counts as practical in the first place.

Some say there is no time for this transformation; the crisis is too pressing and the clock is ticking. I agree that it would be reckless to claim that the only solution to the crisis is to revolutionize our economy and revamp our worldview from the bottom-up—and anything short of that is not worth doing. There are all kinds of measures that would lower emissions substantially that could and should be done right now. But we aren’t taking those measures, are we? The reason is that failing to fight these big battles that stand to shift our ideological direction and change the balance of who holds power in our societies, a context has been slowly created in which any muscular response to climate change seems politically impossible. (Ibid, 25)

From this perspective, it is no accident that the dominance of climate technocracy and pragmatism coincide with the dramatic rise of neoliberalism—arguably the ideological apex of egocentrism and anthropocentrism as an ideological justification for *laisse-faire* capitalism. The principle assumption driving neoliberal responses to climate change is that free market solutions are the only rational way to confront collective problems like this. Hence, as well-intentioned climate technocrats and pragmatists understood at each moment of decision, only profit-driven measures like cap-and-trade could *actually* motivate carbon mitigation in practice without compromising economic growth (arguably the highest and least-questioned imperative driving economic and political existence). Now Gardiner would certainly be right to claim that this ideological reach into the cultural background is indeed motivated at the top by powerful interests. Compared to Klein (and Jamieson), however, his analysis of practical behavior doesn’t

adequately explain what motivates the bottom, the public, to *openly accept and take up* this ideological invitation.

Given Klein's political understanding of our historical situation, the justification for shifting our ideological direction is that an alternative "context" is needed if coherent proposals for addressing the systemic roots of climate change are to seem politically realistic and legitimate. In a sense, something like a cultural paradigm shift in public values and sensibilities is needed for people to recognize, question, and work through neoliberal assumptions (particularly egocentric and anthropocentric assumptions about human motivation that make free market approaches to climate change seem like the only practical way to achieve measurable progress). For example, liberal arts education, academic debate in the humanities, books (fiction and non-fiction), news media, cinema, the visual arts, and a plethora of other efforts are needed to critically rework the cultural landscape of common-sense assumptions and ultimately shift the narrative of climate response. Critically, however, knowing that an ideological battle will ensue as soon as the neoliberal narrative starts losing ground, Klein recognizes that a truly decisive shift in the cultural landscape *also* requires creating spaces for political involvement. Committed to achieving cultural victories in the material contexts of political action, this is where the practical contingencies motivating behavior central to Gardiner's analysis come into play.

To the extent that the challenges of climate response lead to political contests over visions of the future, Klein's ideological approach suggests a need to mediate the social and cultural dimensions of the collective action problem by bringing these distinct motives into productive relation. Indeed, whether focusing on cultural vs. social motives, ethical vs. political motives, or historical vs. material motives, the imperative of bringing

these distinct motives into productive relation in the ambiguous contexts of lifeworld existence ultimately defines the dissertation project as a whole. Contrasting with Gardner yet consistent with Jamieson, the challenges of collectivizing action must be understood in historical-cultural context. It requires refiguring the ideological background against which political decisions seem sensible, legitimate, and compelling. But in contrast to Jamieson and more consistent with Gardner, collective action must also be concretely *situated* in the practical contexts of political action where material consequences, not just ideas and values, are decisive. When considering what kind of political strategies stand the best chance of shifting the public narrative on systemic problems like climate change, activists cannot focus too strongly on which ideological platform or worldview vision speaks most clearly to the ethical implications of climate change. Among other things, they must also appeal to people's material concerns and needs (e.g., for social security). Likewise, putting economic and political decision-makers on the defensive cannot rest with efforts to ideologically delegitimize the regime they support. Activists must also work to create the kind of practical conditions that would make inaction (or insufficient action) on climate change more economically or politically risky than action.

In the final analysis, then, I submit that Gardiner and Jamieson are subject to a common point of criticism that carries important political and philosophical implications moving forward. I have argued that each relies heavily on a one-sided logic of collective motivation that fails to account for the relationship mediating cultural and social institutions. Jamieson, for his part, calls for a cultural revolution while advancing practical measures firmly rooted in the economic logic of capitalism. Unfortunately, as I argue, this approach seems to minimize the influence social institutions have on

maintaining and reinforcing cultural institutions in practice. Gardiner's practical analysis, on the other hand, effectively obviates questions of culture altogether. His game theoretical approach diagnosis economic and political institutions as the central barriers to practical action and concludes with a call for creating new institutions on the basis of a mutually-agreed contract. Yet, the cultural basis of such an agreement is minimized.

Finally, if we take Cuomo's language of *taking* responsibility seriously, one more point can be made concerning Jamieson and Gardiner's philosophical approaches to the collective action problem—and hence, the need for a lifeworld alternative. In addition to being methodologically reductive, it could also be said that their structural analyses are too “objectivist” in orientation to account for the relatively subjective and intersubjective process of *actively internalizing* responsibility. Importantly, the ethical implications of climate change are not encountered evenly because the institutions mediating this process do not situate everyone evenly. Once questions turn from the general barriers to collective action to the *experiential* conditions under which people work through these barriers to get to a point of action, structural *differences* in socio-cultural background and power become more significant. Addressing the conditions under which people internalize the ethical implications of climate change and come to take responsibility for this problem requires greater sensitivity to these structural differences.

Unfortunately, Jamieson and Gardiner's macro-level accounts of the institutional barriers to ethical motivation are too sweeping in scope and application (and thus objectivist) to afford this kind of sensitivity. There is an extent to which they treat the institutional barriers to collective action universally, as if they situate everyone homogeneously regardless of socio-cultural differences in class, gender, and race, for

example. Taking Jamieson's position to its logical conclusion, it would seem that virtually anyone who accurately perceived the ethical dimensions of climate change would be naturally compelled to act regardless of differences in social position. Likewise, for Gardiner, differences in socio-cultural background don't appear to factor into who is more or less subject to the perfect storm of moral corruption. To the extent that each thinker overly generalizes the pull of institutions on collective behavior, the problem of collective action effectively amounts to a universal conflict between the institutions motivating problematic behavior and the systemic logic of climate change demanding an ethical response to it. Hence, their overly-general treatments of the structural barriers to collective action lead them to prescribe overly-general proposals for overcoming them—whether in the form of a cultural revolution or a binding social contract.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter is meant to introduce the structural challenges of motivating collective action on climate change. Beginning with a critique of climate technocracy and pragmatism, my opening thesis is that a genuinely problem-driven response to this systemic problem requires ethical motivation. In my view, Cuomo, Jamieson, and Gardiner all offer valuable contributions to this end. Ethical motives to honestly process the systemic implications of climate change are needed partly because of the power disparities involved along with the confusing and inconvenient nature of this problem.

Yet, in my view, neither thinker adequately answers questions about *how* ethical motives emerge, strengthen, and spread to others for the sake of realizing systemic change. Cuomo moves from analyzing the structures of political power to calling for

concerned communities to take responsibility for climate change, but without sufficiently treating the structural barriers to motivating this kind of ethical conviction. Jamieson and Gardiner, by contrast, examine the cultural and social barriers to ethical responsibility. But unlike Cuomo, they neglect questions of institutionalized power and political agency essential to overcoming these structural barriers. As I have argued, Jamieson and Gardiner's macro-level analyses of the structural barriers to collective action tend to express reductive assumptions of the relation between institutions and human motivation. My argument, in other words, is that the cultural logic of Jamieson's theory of collective motivation and the social/practical logic of Gardiner's position are, in the final analysis, mutually exclusive to the detriment of each.

Stepping back to juxtapose the strengths and limitations of Cuomo, on the one hand, and those of Jamieson and Gardiner, on the other, the principle question moving forward is this: Given the *socio-cultural* barriers to motivating a truly problem-driven response, how might communities take ethical responsibility for climate change in the process of realizing the grassroots political agency needed to *overcome* these barriers? Acquiring traction on this problem demands an alternative philosophy of collective motivation that refigures and deepens what I have been calling the systemic logic of climate response. First, the power of existing institutions to maintain inadequate solutions to climate change (particularly by serving the status quo over problem-driven responses) has to be understood at the intersections of socio-cultural existence where shared normative assumptions and practical structures of collective behavior mutually reinforce each other in conservative ways. The true force of political, cultural, and social barriers to ethical motivation in response to climate change, I submit, has to be approached

comprehensively as structural *relations* where history and power operate in the background of intersubjective experience and find their ballast there.

Furthermore, I contend, it is precisely in this socio-cultural space that the dynamics of collective action can prepare for the advent of change. Systemic change doesn't occur by ramping up cultural solutions to cultural problems or practical solutions to practical problems (or, for that matter, purely political solutions to political problems). It occurs at the critical *disjunctures* of socio-cultural existence when these collective motives—no longer lived in mutual reinforcement—start losing their hold. Noticing and negotiating these disjunctures effectively ultimately requires an ethico-political attunement to how these institutional barriers are actively embodied in collective experience—in ways that are both specific to socio-cultural differences and power relations and in relatively general ways that are irreducible to these differences.

As I mention in the introduction above and thematize more explicitly in the final chapter, the ultimate goal is to advance an ethico-political ontology of climate agency to help grassroots activists (among others) make sense of—and navigate—the primordial soup of structural relations constituting the climate situation. As such, this larger project fundamentally implicates the political, cultural, and social structures of the collective action problem, but the challenges of climate response extend further than these structural relations alone admit. In the final analysis, questions about relations of all kind have to be reconsidered in light of the paradoxes of climate inaction. These include relations between ideas and behavior or theory and practice, certainly, but also more generally between subjective experience and objective institutions, history and nature, self and other—and all the way to the most abstract relations between whole and part, internal and

external, activity and passivity, etc., that everyone ultimately relies on in one way or another to make sense of the world and their lives in it. Whether grasped concretely or abstractly, or on this register or that one, my overarching thesis is that these and many other relations are *lived* as *relations of motivation* in the lifeworld background of collective existence. To this extent, let us hope, it becomes possible to start discerning the field of forces consistently drowning and thwarting a genuine response to systemic climate change, and more importantly to begin the work of progressively bringing these motives into productive relation as we struggle to transcend them.

It is certainly important to analyze the institutional landscape constituting the systemic logic of climate change as a collective action problem (indeed, this is the *raison d'être* of the present chapter). But it's not enough to ground theory on institutions as such, as if objectively diagnosing these structural barriers will naturally suggest avenues for overcoming them. It is just as important to carefully focus on how these institutions are actively experienced and taken up by those who are otherwise passively situated by them. Grappling with how communities might come to *take* responsibility for climate change, in other words, requires moving beyond macro-level analyses of the way institutions objectively situate (and thus passively govern) general reactions to this problem. If we wish to understand how people might get to a point of action by internalizing the ethical implications of climate change, this requires a more nuanced grasp of the way people take up socio-cultural institutions intersubjectively. To this end, I advance a lifeworld approach to the problem of collectively motivating an ethical, problem-driven response to the climate situation. In the next chapter, I bring the ethical quandary of denial closer to home.

## CHAPTER III

### AN EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF CLIMATE DENIAL:

#### ETHICAL MOTIVATION AND LIFEWORLD IDENTITY

##### *Introduction*

Having offered a macro-level structural reading of the political, cultural, and social barriers to motivating collective action on climate change, this chapter offers an existential-phenomenological approach to the ethical quandary of climate denial. Cuomo, Jamieson, and Gardiner, recall, all recognize the institutional failures of climate response and they argue in some form that a problem-driven response to this issue has to be ethically motivated. But each position identifies different structural aspects of this institutional failure that angle their analysis, and when turning to the question of overcoming the structural barriers to ethical motivation focusing each analysis, important limitations emerge. How do people collectively internalize the ethical implications of systemic problems like climate change and come to take responsibility for the global future accordingly? This is an essential question that the climate literature seems to find intractable.

In my view, one could do no better than to turn to radical grassroots climate movements to see this kind of ethical responsibility in action. Fortunately, ethnographic research has been conducted on grassroots experiments to this end.<sup>46</sup> A study of the Australian climate camps by Stuart, Goodman, and Pearse (2013) offers a particularly good example of a collective comprehensively working through the political, cultural,

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<sup>46</sup> In addition to the study referenced in the following sentence of the text, see: Kent 2016; Abbott and Wilson 2015; Dietz and Garrelts 2014; North 2011; Pearse, Goodman, and Rosewarne 2010; Reeves, Lemon, and Cook 2014; Scott-Cato and Hillier 2010; and Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012.

and social barriers discussed in the previous chapter in dogged pursuit of a genuinely problem-driven response. As their interviews illustrate, this grassroots movement was politically committed to systemic change from the bottom up, activists worked through problematic cultural sensibilities and values to achieve greater clarity on the ethical implications of the climate problem, and they worked to strategically carve out spaces for direct action to achieve material results in practice. Evidently, radical movements like this suggest that responding to a deeply systemic problem like climate change has to be oriented in deeply comprehensive ways across these domains. But what ethically motivates this striving for transcendence? How did these activists get to a point of action in the first place?

These questions are important for multiple reasons. If radical climate movements hope to grow by attracting a large mass of people to the cause, deepen their own resolve to survive the inevitable frustrations and setbacks they sign up for, and ultimately emerge with others as a political *tour de force* on the stage of world—and indeed geological—history, they have to become a profoundly ethical movement. The success of an ethically-driven movement of this kind, moreover, also depends on attracting and retaining enough public support in democratic societies to put the fossil fuel regime on the defensive and delegitimize it. This, I think, is particularly important. But unfortunately, beyond the handful of activists driving radical movements like the climate camps, the kind of ethical motivation they exemplify appears all too uncommon in the public sphere, at least when measured against the gravity of the problem. Growing an ethically contagious mass movement for systemic change powered at the grassroots level requires a deeply concerned population of citizens open to this contagion.

Research across disciplines suggests that few people seem to care enough about the ethical implications of climate change to seriously reflect on them, let alone act (Adams 2014; Brechin and Bhandri. 2011; Brulle, Carmichael, and Jenkins 2012; Capstick, et al. 2015; Carvalho 2010; Gifford 2011; Hamilton 2010; Hamilton and Keim 2009; Leiserowitz, Kates, and Parris 2006; Lertzman 2015; Lucas, Leith, and Davison 2015; Marshall 2015; Sinanian 2017; Smith and Leiserowitz 2012; Spence Poortinga, and Pidgeon 2012; Washington 2011; Whitmarsh 2009).<sup>47</sup> Perhaps, with Jamieson, this is largely because people cannot make ethical sense of climate change against the anthropocentric and egocentric background of cultural assumptions they inherited. Or maybe many people do care, as Gardiner believes, but succumb to moral corruption because they cannot find the social space needed to express their concerns in practice. Yet, questions of care, ethical motivation, or “being in a state of ultimate concern” to invoke Tillich again, cannot be adequately grasped at the level of structural analysis. Responsibility is *taken* when people are intimately moved to do so. Institutions can constrain and enable ethical reflection and action, but the more subjective and intersubjective aspects of care are what motivate people to actively take up some institutions and distance themselves from others in the process of internalizing responsibility (or irresponsibility). And yet, not unlike Jamieson and Gardiner, the vast majority of research on public attitudes towards climate change is dedicated to determining the various barriers to such concern with little attention devoted to the relatively qualitative (and elusive) question of overcoming these barriers.

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<sup>47</sup> As previously noted (footnote 34), U.S. concerns about the climate have recently increased but still rank 15<sup>th</sup> on their list of priorities.

Climate researchers in the social sciences who study “public engagement” are an exception (Carvalho and Peterson 2012; Corner, Markowitz, and Pidgeon 2014; Gifford and Comeau 2011; Hall, Taplin, and Goldstein 2010; Hannant 2010; Hobson and Niemeyer 2011; Moser and Dilling 2007; Nisbet 2009; Roeser 2012; Schweizer, Davis, and Thompson 2013; Spence and Pidgeon 2010; Spoel, et al. 2009; Weintrobe 2010 and 2013; Whitmarsh, Seyfang, and O’Neill 2011; Whitmarsh, O’Neill, and Lorenzoni 2013 and 2015; Wolf and Moser 2011.) Whitmarsh (2009), in particular, has garnered attention for her tripartite theory in which personal engagement on climate change involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements. Generally speaking, how one *thinks* about climate change, how one *feels* about it, and how one *acts* or responds in practice are mutually constitutive. Slightly modifying this insight, Rosewarne, Goodman, and Pearse (2013, 156) write: “Coming to grips with the Anthropocene is at once an affective, cognitive and political task.” In this context, we might say that Jamieson largely focuses on the “cognitive” aspects of ethical action in terms of cultural sensibilities, while Gardiner centers more on the “behavioral” significance of ethical action vis-à-vis one’s practical abilities to express ethical concern. Both philosophers, however, offer little to no theoretical attention on the *affective* dimensions of inaction. The conceptual challenges of making sense of the structural logic of climate change are considered, along with the practical challenges of responding to it, but the emotional challenges of confronting the climate crisis receive little attention.

This tendency is problematic for any discussion that touches on motivation (the very word ‘emotion’ has *motion* etymologically built into it). As Rosewarne, *et al.* discovered in their study, the journey to taking responsibility for climate justice

committed activists to an affective labor of ethical reflection on existential matters of ultimate significance. Indeed, one perceives in these interviews evidence of Tillich's notion of faith: "In the first instance, climate action is expressed as a deeply held moral commitment. Activists describe experiences of ethical and affective connection with the climate problem as catalysts to their involvement in the movement" (Ibid, 65).

Given the scale of the challenge, interviewees oscillated between despair and hope. Here the movement becomes the hope against hope, as the vehicle of change. As the crisis deepened, the movement assumed greater significance. Here, the pessimism of the intellect strengthened the optimism of the will in a dialectic where one demanded the other....This political imagination for the climate age had its foundations in an ethical sense of purpose, of humanising climate change. Here we found activists defining and asserting explicitly ethical foundations for their collective action. These ethical principles translated values into political practice, through the movement. As such, they were a form of relational ethics, involving an engaged ethic of 'care' rather than some logic of duty. (Ibid, 88)

Caring about populations most vulnerable to climate change, the state of the biosphere, and future generations isn't always spontaneous. Caring is indeed a form of labor (and so is *not* caring, as we shall see with Norgaard). Among other things, caring involves courage to sincerely take in the science in whatever capacity and think deeply about the daunting implications of what one discovers. "The hard certainty of science prompted a deeply affective crisis that for some produced nightmares and depression" (Ibid, 99). Consider, for example, what happens when one ponders the fact that carbon levels now exceed 400ppm—a level the biosphere hasn't been adapted to for countless millennia. And what happens when one begins to realize that climate change is inextricably bound to a plethora of other global dangers like ocean acidification and the sixth mass extinction in Earth's history? All things considered, the ethical implications of climate change suggest that humans (especially those bearing most responsibility for this crisis) need to adapt to the nonhuman world, rather than forcing nature to adapt to them.

But this points to a profound and disturbing reversal in the Western psyche that contradicts centuries of socio-cultural momentum. If one accepts Carolyn Merchant's (1980) thesis, the metaphor of a mechanistic universe that emerged during the Scientific Revolution effectively synthesized modern science, technology, and capitalism under the rubric of human dominion over nature. Indeed, for Lynn White Jr. (1967), the anthropocentric relation to nature that entitles human dominion has religious foundations that traces back to *Genesis*. Some thinkers even take this sweeping project to domesticate nature all the way back to the Neolithic—or First Agricultural—Revolution for a deeper account of this biblical cosmology and modern science, technology, and capitalism.<sup>48</sup> But regardless of academic speculation, can news of climate change confront this socio-cultural inertia? And should one go further to examine the systemic relationship between the anthropocentric institutions driving climate change and the social injustices systemic to these same institutions, how can one cope with such a totalizing condition? Nevertheless, as Rosewarne, Goodman, and Pearse (2013, 17) have discovered, an ability to process this affective struggle seems essential: “the potential for climate agency comes from precisely this combined engagement with the intensity of the crisis and an ability to reflect on how to act on society to address the crisis.” The question is how to do this productively.

This brings me to Kari Marie Norgaard's social psychology of climate denial. As she explains, many otherwise thoughtful and caring people don't think deeply about the ethical implications of climate change and take responsibility for this problem because

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<sup>48</sup> For a representative example of this position, see Max Oelschlaeger's (1991) *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*, particularly the first chapter “The Idea of Wilderness: From Paleolithic to Neolithic Culture.”

they cannot cope with the emotional disturbances sure to accompany such reflection. In this chapter, then, I argue that cultivating and deepening ethical motivation for taking responsibility requires, among other things, an ability to effectively process the daunting implications of the climate crisis. That is, in addition to making sense of the structural logic of climate change and finding ways of responding to this in practice, people must somehow learn to collectively bear the weight of this crisis without escape and without being crushed.

Drawing on Edmund Husserl's concept of the lifeworld and Martin Heidegger's analysis of anxiety, I offer an existential-phenomenological reading of Norgaard's ethnographic work to revisit the ethical quandary of denial outlined in the previous chapter. My thesis here is that climate change tends to be received as an existential threat to lifeworld identity that shuts down ethical reflection, and thus responsibility. I call this the existential problem—and while I do not pretend that this problem is universally felt, I do argue that it affords a background framework against which important differences in lifeworld experience can be judged or evaluated. To the extent that engaging the ethical implications of climate change in good faith risks unraveling the socio-cultural fabric of collective identity, the threat of existential anxiety is often enough to motivate “denial” in some measure as a protective defense. From this perspective, then, I suggest that the barriers to collective action are significantly “existential” and offer an existential account of overcoming these barriers for the sake of taking ethical responsibility.

Critically, however, it has to be acknowledged that the existential crisis in collective identity promised by the climate problem is, in important respects, quite novel on the stage of human history. To be clear, existential crises at this scale of collective

existence are not uncommon in history. At times, social existence exceeds cultural existence, at other times vice versa. In the immediate wake of the industrial revolution, for instance, practical existence in many Western countries was being radically and rapidly transformed in ways that conflicted with traditional norms, values, and sensibilities. Perhaps for some people today, by contrast, the opposite is true. Against a background of mores (growing in cultural momentum since the 1960s, say) counseling a respect for human rights, justice, dignity, ecological integrity, responsible land stewardship, etc., many today are deeply offended by the practical consequences of industrial capitalism that has accelerated over this period—and perhaps feel morally alienated from the social world they find themselves in. In either case, the existential crisis signaling conflicts in lifeworld identity like these mark a socio-cultural *disjuncture*. But the point I want to make is that the climate problem spells a different kind of existential crisis. After all, basic conflicts in socio-cultural existence can be healed by reforming cultural institutions to fit more comfortably with existing social institutions, or vice-versa. But to the extent that social and cultural institutions achieve normative coherence and stability by finding mutual confirmation in daily life, it's another thing altogether to address basic conflicts between lifeworld identity as a *socio-cultural whole* and the material world *beyond* it.

Putting the matter more succinctly, there is a sense in which the essential conflict defining the existential problem is between history and nature. An existential-phenomenological reading of this problem, I contend, can help us effectively grapple with the climate situation we find ourselves in today—and hopefully work through it. But

much of this begins with an ability to ethically reflect and talk about the daunting implications of this situation without escape.

### ***The Affective Dimensions of Ethical Reflection***

Kari Marie Norgaard's (2011) ethnographic research on climate denial was conducted in Norway, a country she selected because of its largely educated and politically-involved citizenry with an impressive record of environmental action. Consequently, she believed, the subtler aspects of climate denial could be investigated more clearly in this setting. In Norway, one can see that the dominant theories of climate denial (focusing mostly on ignorance, ideology, apathy, and greed) miss the mark. Accounts of inaction that center on such phenomena tend to rely on problematic assumptions about human nature that stress either rational actor theories of behavior or see denial as a kind of passive impotence or indifference. The most widespread example of this is what is known as the "information deficit model," where the so-called failure to respond to climate change is understood in terms of ignorance or misinformation—assuming, as it does, that if people only *knew* the science they would take climate change seriously and act differently. The hope here is that educating the public or countering false political ideologies and media reporting that cast doubt on climate change will clear the way to motivate collective action. Other approaches assume that overcoming greed, apathy, and other vices will generate a response. Again, however, these conditions aren't especially salient in Norway. Her observations suggest, on the contrary, that climate denial is more complex and indirect than is commonly believed.

Climate denial takes multiple forms (Ibid, 11-12; Cohen 2011). The most well-known in the United States is the “literal denial” that dismisses the science of climate change. Even in the US, however, literal denial only accounts for a minority of the population. A more prevalent form is “interpretive denial,” where climate change is accepted as factual, but the facts are interpreted in ways that dismiss it as a serious threat. For example, a faith in social “development” and historical “progress” can bring comfortable interpretations of climate change as a problem that will eventually be solved by the experts and other agents of history. The third form of denial, however, is the subtlest and perhaps most widespread (particularly among liberals). In what is called “implicatory denial,” climate change is acknowledged as real and it’s interpreted as a serious threat, but the ethical implications of this issue are consistently minimized. As Norgaard (2011, 11) puts it, implicatory denial reflects “a failure to integrate... knowledge [of climate change] into everyday life or transform it into social action.”

To get a sense of implicatory denial, perhaps one can think of it as a condition suspended somewhere between two kinds of questions—factual and normative—that can be expected to come up when first learning about climate change. As a lead into Norgaard’s theory, therefore, let’s consider a hypothetical line of inquiry to model the logic of personal reflection (and, by extension, interpersonal dialogue) in response to news of climate change. Specifically, suppose that reflection on this issue begins with factual questions about *what the climate problem is* followed by normative questions (ethical and political) about *how we should respond* to it.

The first set of questions are factual: What is climate change? Is this truly happening? What does nature have to do with human existence and my life in particular?

Are we vulnerable to risks? How did this problem come about? Is it really anthropogenic? Addressing these questions well, we might think, involves (but isn't limited to) at least some measure of scientific literacy. But questions concerning the facticity of climate change aren't limited to the geological and ecological dynamics that universally condition life in general and human life more specifically. Once questions about anthropogenic influence surface in the process of coming to terms with the reality of climate change as a *natural* phenomenon, attention can shift to climate change as a *human* (e.g., social) phenomenon. Within the framework of the natural sciences, one can merely say that greenhouse gas emissions accumulating since the industrial revolution threaten to destabilize the carbon cycle, and so on. But this line of factual questioning quickly runs against limits. After all, if global deforestation motivated concern, for instance, serious questioning wouldn't be satisfied with accounts that rested on various individuals around the world physically cutting down trees one by one, even though this is perhaps the most indisputably factual reason one could possibly give. We would want to know not just *what* is happening but *why* it is happening on such a dramatic scale, and this more abstract question points to larger (systemic, structural) forces at play that factual descriptions alone just don't capture.

A way is therefore needed to consider the historical emergence of climate change as a consequence of institutional structures, which suggests an important role for the social sciences. Pursuing this line of thought, moreover, might lead one to consider climate change as an economic and political phenomenon—and perhaps a matter of justice. If approached specifically as an environmental issue, grappling with the social facticity of climate change would likely prompt questions about social relations to nature

(vis-à-vis production and consumption). But if motivated by concerns over justice, attention might instead be directed to the structure of social and international relations (vis-à-vis class, gender, race, colonialism, imperialism, etc.). Furthermore, to the extent that social *and* socio-ecological relations intersect compressively in economic structures, at some point these originally distinct lines of inquiry might converge to prompt a more comprehensive grasp of this systemic problem (e.g., under the rubric of climate justice).

These more abstract lines of inquiry, we could imagine, would be all the more pressing once the reality and gravity of climate change (increasingly grasped as “fact”) is juxtaposed with the record of political failure to responsibly address it. To the extent that concern is grounded in scientific accounts of climate change and enough reflection and dialogue has occurred on the risks implied by the science, one is likely to perceive a disconcerting gulf between problem and response. In this context, one might turn again to sociological questions concerning economic and political motives in an effort to make sense of these failures. With respect to a perceived lack of concern at the public level, moreover, one might turn to *cultural* questions (germane to the humanities and qualitative research in the social sciences) focused on, say, consumerism, alienation, or problematic worldview assumptions.

At some point, let us assume, during this long, multifaceted, and perhaps tortured chain of thought, reflection would turn from factual or interpretive questions about climate change as a natural and socio-cultural reality to *normative* questions concerning how we should respond to this situation. Compared to the previous line of inquiry, normative questions about personal and collective responsibility might hit closer to home. First, given that dramatic socio-cultural changes in industrial existence are needed to

avert the worst of what is already an unstoppable crisis, what will the future hold for me and those I care about (children, community, nation, humanity, wildlife) if failures to adequately respond continue? Are tipping points a real possibility? Are the material conditions of life evolved over eons threatened at some core level? Is civilization, even the human species, seriously at risk if nothing is done? And to what extent, one might ask against the background of these disturbing questions, am *I* and those close to me *implicated* in this problem? How is the life that I and everyone around me has always taken for granted contributing to this unthinkable crisis in the making? What can I possibly do in the face of this deeply systemic, global, and intergenerational problem to respond? Given my situation in life, what are my options? Are any positive or meaningful alternatives to this trajectory even conceivable? Perhaps most unsettling of all is the dark thought that even the most ardent ethical responses I could muster are likely to amount to little more than an inconsequential drop in the ocean of history (just as some busy people might recognize on election day that their single vote is certain to be lost in a sea of millions). Even if thinking gets past scientific questions about the reality and seriousness of climate change to reach more abstract questions about the social and cultural dimensions of this issue, one might reasonably wonder how long one could sustain the weight of this kind of reflection as it inches closer to home.

As a hypothetical, I've drawn a somewhat linear line of inquiry from *factual* questions about the reality of climate change to normative and ultimately *ethical* questions about how people should respond to it. I've suggested, accordingly, that implicatory denial is suspended somewhere between these poles of inquiry. In practice, of course, reflection doesn't proceed in such a straightforward manner. Questions intended

to make sense of climate change and questions touching on the normative implications of this issue are mutually intertwined, even though the former may be conceptual in content and the latter relatively affective in nature. When asking seemingly focused questions about the scientific reality of climate change, there is surely some kind of awareness in the background that other, far weightier questions about the sheer gravity and daunting ethical implications of this reality—if *accepted as true*—loom on the horizon. Even if unconsciously, how far one gets on the “rational” questions of climate facticity is surely affected by the more normative questions waiting in anticipation. As Friedrich Nietzsche recognized, there is always a quantum of reason in every emotion, and vice-versa. And as psychologists today recognize, reason is always motivated.

Now to the extent that one has faith in oneself as a courageous truth-seeker or as an educated and effective agent in the world, for instance, or one has a more general faith in the human potential to overcome its biggest problems, reflection *might* proceed somewhat in the manner outlined above. With enough security, it is perhaps conceivable that inquiry could more-or-less stretch from the detached questions of climate facticity to the ethical and political dimensions of this problem. Without the security afforded by some kind of faith, however, the daunting normative questions waiting on the horizon could have enough *anticipated weight* to strongly motivate—i.e., orient—reflection on seemingly rational questions of facticity. To the extent that one’s hidden intuitions tell them that there are no viable answers on the horizons, there is a strong incentive to neutralize the very questions calling for such answers. Likewise, problems with no solutions in reach cannot be confronted as problems to begin with. In these cases, the ethical implications latent in the background might be enough to motivate people to

rejection of the reality of climate change (literal denial), minimize its seriousness (interpretive denial), or distance themselves from the normative/ethical implications of this issue (implicatory denial).

Norgaard's work, then, is intended to shed light on climate denial as a coping strategy for dealing with the emotional weight of processing the implications of this heavy issue. Yet, in contrast to the hypothetical model of *personal* reflection offered above, it's important to note Norgaard's sociological approach. For her, climate denial is "socially organized," meaning that it is more collective than individual. She therefore situates her work at the meso-level of intersubjective relations in contrast to individualistic or structural theories of denial.

In her own words, implicatory denial is "generated and maintained in response to social circumstances and carried out through a process of interaction" (Ibid, 9). Unconsciously motivated by disturbing feelings prompted by the implications of climate change, such as fear, guilt, and powerlessness, denial occurs when people employ certain norms of conversation and other socio-cultural behaviors as a way of keeping the troubling implications of this ominous problem from surfacing. This involves any number of intersubjective strategies, most of which aim to micro-manage perception and ways of thinking in order to manage these feelings. Hence, people work with others to protect themselves (and perhaps each other) by keeping the implications of climate change out of the sphere of everyday reality. Examples of this include pressures to remain optimistic, keeping conversations light (and changing topics or using humor when this is violated), sticking to the technical facts of the matter as opposed to its deeper meaning, and focusing on the past or the present rather than the future, or on local problems rather than

global ones. Norgaard also noticed denial at work in the form of an appropriation of various narratives, metaphors, and other cultural resources to help communities rationalize inaction and avoid taking in the troubling implications of this daunting issue.

These collective strategies—in motion as long as climate change disturbs and unsettles—may seem inconsequential when considered in isolation. But if Norgaard is right, the intentional if unconscious product is a collective safeguarding that helps people live with something that would otherwise overwhelm them.

Questions about how people ‘create distance’ from information on climate change and “hold information at arm’s length” seem absurd if we take the everyday world at face value. But collectively constructing a sense of time and place, a sense of what is and is not appropriate to pay attention to or feel, is an important social and political process. In such constructions, we see the intersection of private emotions and the macrolevel reproduction of ideology and power. (Ibid, 97)

Again, implicative climate denial is a collective accomplishment in response to lived situations experienced in common, not just a psychological mechanism. We need to convince *each other*, not simply ourselves, that climate change doesn’t personally implicate us in any meaningful way. Given the epistemological authority of science in Western societies, and the wide availability of information about climate change today, covering up the deeper implications of this issue takes work. And apparently, the threat of climate change is enough to motivate this kind of work. Of course, to the extent that even outspoken believers in the science of climate change successfully convince each other that they aren’t *really* implicated in this issue, or that the experts will eventually solve it, truly ethical questions never come up.

Norgaard’s work on the affective dimensions of climate denial implies that it is insufficient (but not exactly false) to suggest with Jamieson and Gardiner that inaction on climate change boils down to a lack of appropriate institutions to guide a response.

Again, one must consider what moves people to take up existing institutions or open themselves up to alternatives. If Norgaard is right, a new cultural paradigm to conceptually clarify the ethical implications of climate change or a new social contract to create a space for ethical concern in practice isn't likely to resolve the problem of inaction—because it is precisely the ethical implications *themselves* that many people are motivated to avoid in the first place. Climate change is a threat to moral identity.

As Norgaard explains, coming to terms with the ethical implications of this problem ultimately “threatens identity and raises questions about the goodness of people, individually and collectively” (Ibid, 88).

[D]enial is also important to understand because it provides a window into a wholly new and profound aspect of the experience of modern existence. It is an outcome of a world where for millions of people a keen moral socialization and a belief in equality collide with more information about the vast inequalities of economics and life chances of people than ever before. Climate denial is an outcome of a world in which time and space have been restructured such that the most intimate details of life from food, clothing, or family vacations are directly yet invisibly linked to the hardships and poverty of people in other parts of the world. Climate denial is a consequence of a world in which boundaries that once existed are collapsing. (Ibid, 221)

As a physical phenomenon, climate change might be a threat to material well-being. But it becomes a threat to moral identity insofar as one feels intimately implicated—as producers or consumers in the industrialized societies most responsible for climate change—in an issue that profoundly conflicts with their ethical sense of who they are and their way of being in the world.

Indeed, not only do the ethical implications of climate change threaten to shed a morally repugnant light on the connections between one's everyday existence and the hardships of millions in certain parts of the world, but also on future generations all over the globe and even on the biosphere itself. At a deeply personal level, the historical

situation we're in presents a kind of existential gravity in which the only two options are to somehow bear this unbearable weight or find relief in escape. Given the abstract logic of systemic climate change (as Jamieson and Gardiner discuss), many of those firmly implicated in the climate crisis still have the psychological luxury of postponing what is tantamount to a moral identity crisis.

And yet, when Norgaard links climate denial to living in a world of “collapsing boundaries,” she is signaling that more than moral identity is at stake. The socio-cultural implications of climate change threaten collective identity more generally still. For those socialized and encultured in the industrial world responsible for climate change, the implications of this systemic problem fundamentally challenge the socio-cultural continuity of existence, and the very integrity of lived experience accordingly. As such, openly reflecting on the deeper implications of this existential threat ultimately risks an oceanic flood of anxiety that people are “profoundly motivated to avoid” (Ibid, 197). From this perspective, I suggest, the ethical quandary of climate denial moves from being an emotional or affective problem to becoming an existential problem.

### ***The Existential Problem: Ontological Insecurity and Climate Anxiety***

Bill McKibben (2012) once remarked that addressing climate change is like building a movement against ourselves, as if the abolition movement depended on slave owners. Although we can draw powerful examples of collective mobilization from history, as with World War II, what most of them have in common is a felt need to react against an external threat like fascism. Climate change, however, complicates this line between external and internal. McKibben doesn't believe that “external enemies” are

absent. In a world marked by widening gaps of wealth and power, it's not the consumers that have been controlling the fate of climate policy over the past two decades. One must look instead to producers and campaign donors like Exxon Mobil. McKibben's point, however, is that most people in affluent societies tend to *identify* with the very industrial world order that Exxon Mobil represents. Collective identity, after all, has long been infused with the ethos, mores, and practical routines of industrialization, including its scientific, technological, and economic power. There's a sense, therefore, in which many see themselves—their past, present, and future—in the very world responsible for climate change, and so cannot safely imagine carbon-healthy alternatives to it.

In the Marxist tradition, Herbert Marcuse touches on this problem with his concept of one-dimensionality. For Marcuse, alienation in advanced capitalist societies had reached new levels of reification in the century following Marx's formulations (indeed, when Marx and Engels (1970, 64) famously proclaimed that “[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas,” one might wonder if even they would be surprised by how profoundly right they were by the time Marcuse was writing. Citizens tend to see themselves in a world that is nevertheless alien to them, perhaps as medieval Christians saw themselves in a supernatural God beyond their experience and power to influence. For him, however, the “external world” most identify with today belongs, not to the supernatural, but rather to the material order that governs everyday existence. The result, for Marcuse, is a generalized *internalization* of the industrial order itself to the extent that it has become self-evident and beyond question deep in the background of collective existence. With the introduction of mass communications, for instance, social experience has become reified to such an extent that our ability to think, speak, feel,

behave, and perceive *beyond* the industrial order of immediate existence has become severely compromised. Thus, Marcuse (1964, 85) explains, the genuine development of meaningful concepts to mediate self and world is precluded: “The concepts which comprehend the facts and thereby transcend the facts are losing their authentic linguistic representation. Without these mediations, language tends to express and promote the immediate identification of reason and fact, truth and established truth, essence and existence, the thing and its function.”

If we add to this list the immediate identification of what “is” (reality) and what “ought to be” (possibility), mediating *ethical* concepts also seem unlikely to develop. Future possibilities are already encapsulated in present realities. Yet, for Marcuse, the function of a viable culture is to mediate existence by meaningfully distinguishing real needs and problems from false ones in light of higher ideals. If the industrial order is received as self-evident, however, any basic problems systemic to it are concealed from the start. The existential problem, therefore, is born from the recognition that truly ethical responses to climate change require shifts in identity that are significantly distinct from the socio-cultural order of industrial existence systemic to this problem.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer come close to this problem in the climate ethics literature with their anthology *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change*. Here, they attempt to broaden the focus from moral prescription to moral identity in an effort to ground action in a new understanding of human excellence. A new vision of the good life is called for to facilitate virtuous ways of being human in a world

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<sup>49</sup> More precisely, this speaks to the “first moment” of the existential problem that I term the “ethical quandary of denial.” The “second moment,” recall, is labeled the “political quandary of transition,” which I introduce in the next chapter.

where adapting to climate change will soon become the prime directive. “*Who we are today*” they explain, “is not ready for this and *who we have been* got us into this mess” (Thompson and Bendik-Keymer 2012, 15). Thus, we are invited to transform ourselves in the context of “well-worked-out relationships between our lives, our institutions, and the extrahuman world” (Ibid, 2).

Once again, however, what remains to be seen is whether or not communities are open to accepting this invitation to self-transform in the first place. This basic problem, recall, parallels those with Jamieson’s proposal for a new ethical paradigm and Gardiner’s proposals for a new social contract. Especially in light of climate denial, it is evident in each case that many people don’t just *lack* the motivation to make basic changes in their lives—they are actively motivated to resist such changes. To the extent that people do in fact internalize a world of socio-cultural forces beyond their grasp and influence, self-transformation in the name of climate ethics must seem like pure fantasy—a request to create something *ex nihilo*. But the existential problem runs deeper still. To the extent that lifeworld identity is fundamentally implicated in the same world order of production and consumption responsible for climate change, asking for fundamental ethical changes that conflict with that world order risks flirting with a profound identity crisis—or what some call an existential crisis.

The implications of climate change don’t just challenge normative assumptions about the goodness of the world and one’s existence in it. Ontological assumptions more generally are at stake, as Norgaard (2011, 81-82) explains:

At the deepest level, large-scale environmental problems such as climate change threaten individual and community senses of the continuity of life—in other words, they threaten what Anthony Giddens calls ‘ontological security.’ ‘Ontological security’

refers to the confidence that most humans have in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' ...In [Norwegian interviewee] Arne's words, 'I think it's a bit worrisome to lose one's roots or to lose connection with, yes, the generations and with a place.' People have a need for meaning in their lives. The present environmental crisis threatens not only people's sense of how the world is (a 'good place,' as many want to believe), but also the meaning of their sense of the continuity of life."

In this respect, implicatory climate denial "at the deepest level" is motivated by the threat of losing basic trust in the world one tacitly relies on to secure the meaning of their very being. The signal of this "ontological insecurity" is a penetrating anxiety that people are profoundly motivated to avoid. As an existential affect that signals a disturbance at the background level of everyday experience, anxiety might be a far more powerful (and collectivistic) motive for denial than relatively personal emotions like fear, helplessness, and guilt.

It is no coincidence that "risk society" social theorists like Anthony Giddens (2009) and Ulrich Beck (2009), and psychological theorists of deep trauma like Robert Jay Lifton (2017), are drawn to climate change as a perfect case study of existential anxiety. For Giddens and Beck, anxiety is endemic to modern society. The globalized, post-traditional institutions that constitute social existence today perpetually challenge the basic trust in the world one shares with others. As Giddens (1991, 47) explains: "To be ontologically secure is to possess... 'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses... The prime existential question... concerns *existence itself*, the discovery of an ontological framework of 'external reality'."

If this articulation of ontological security skirts too closely to the cognitivist idea that "existence itself" denotes a cultural worldview that "answers" questions and affords a "framework of external reality," this definition can be amended by emphasizing that the

so-called answers are *lived* in a socio-cultural sense. Over time, answers to the questions of existence become institutionalized in the form of cultural assumptions about human purpose and human nature, the human relation to nature, individual and group relations to society, and so on. But these assumptions aren't simply constituted in the form of a mental framework. They are also embodied in the economic and political structures that routinize everyday social existence.

Hence, to the extent that comprehensive socio-cultural answers to existential questions about, say, the basic relation between self, society, and nature are repeatedly undermined by rapid historical change, the continuity of existence—and thus socio-cultural identity—is in perpetual danger of destabilizing and becoming unhinged. Citing psychological experiments in which subjects react in “dramatic and immediate” fashion when deep conventions are breached, Giddens explains how disturbances in our “emotive-cognitive orientation towards others, the object-world, and self-identity” produce powerful anxieties that we're instinctively motivated to avoid (Ibid, 38). Giddens quotes psychologist Helen Lynd to bring this point home: “We experience anxiety in becoming aware that we cannot trust our answers to the questions, ‘Who am I?’ ‘Where do I belong?’ ...with every recurrent violation of trust we become again children unsure of ourselves in an alien world” (Ibid, 66). Ultimately, anxiety can paralyze our ability to comport ourselves with integrity, think consistently and creatively in response to pressing contingencies, and act with purpose in anticipation of future possibilities.

Compared to other issues, the notion of climate change appears especially conducive to anxiety. What could be more all-encompassing, more God-like in nature, than the climate? Climate affects the most basic character of the places we live in, and the

notion of an unstable climate might seem for many to portend an uncanny or disorderly world that throws the future into doubt. Or perhaps climate change signifies for some a power of nature somehow *against* us with a mind of its own (I remember vividly, in this regard, encountering a display at the San Francisco Academy of Sciences with a highly visible quote on it by scientist Wallace Broecker that read in large letters, “The climate system is an angry beast and we are poking it with sticks”<sup>50</sup>). In any case, what issue could make us feel smaller, more lost and more powerless? Mike Hulme (2009, 13), quoting Lucian Boial’s *The Weather in the Imagination*, writes:

Indeed, throughout the human experience of realised climate and portended climates, there runs a thread of anxiety and fear. “The history of humanity is characterised by an endemic anxiety...it is as if something or someone is remorselessly trying to sabotage the world’s driving force—and particularly its climate.” The persistent use of visual icons of glaciers...as signifiers of climate danger reveals such anxiety.

In his recent book *The Climate Swerve*, Lifton (2017, x) offers a psychology of “the mind’s response to totalism” that speaks to this climate anxiety. Specifically, he offers a comparative psychology of the “apocalyptic twins” of nuclear warfare and climate change as “world-ending threats.” Although these threats are distinct from one another (nuclear war can be grasped directly as a “specific thing” obvious in its implications whereas climate change occurs slowly in the background of everyday existence), both are totalizing threats that speak to existential anxieties about nature’s ability to sustain life. In his interviews with Japanese survivors of atomic explosion, he writes that “people in Hiroshima became deeply uncertain about how much one could depend upon the natural world to keep human beings alive” (Ibid, 9).

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<sup>50</sup> This quote has been widely reproduced for well over a decade. A 2017 article in *The Guardian* entitled “Humans are on the verge of causing Earth’s fastest climate change in 50m years” shows a terrifying close-up of a fang-bearing grizzly with this quote placed underneath it (Nuccitelli 2017).

From my interviews in Hiroshima I learned of...rumors that revealed survivors' anxious sense of the vulnerability of their habitat. The most persistent of these rumors, and for many the most disturbing, was that trees, grass, and flowers would never again grow in Hiroshima. Because of the bomb's 'poison'—its radiation effects—the city would be unable to sustain vegetation of any kind. Nature would dry up altogether; life would be extinguished at its source. The rumor suggested a form of desolation that not only encompassed human death but went beyond it. (Ibid, 7)

Perhaps this sense of desolation in the face of a dried-up nature *beyond* human death reaches into the darkest depths of what I am calling the existential problem.

Decades later, Lifton (1982, 21) noticed fears in the U.S. of an “amorphous but greatly troubling sense that something has gone wrong with our relationship to nature, something that may undermine its capacity to sustain life.” But he didn't realize the psychological connection between nuclear and environmental fears until years later when he conducted a study with Charles Strozier entitled “Nuclear Fear and the American Self.”

The frequency of environmental and climate anxieties took us by surprise. So did the close interweaving of climate anxieties with nuclear anxieties. We now believe that these findings reflect a shift in the content of the imagery of extinction, from nuclear to climate fear, and to a psychology of representation of such world-ending imagery in which distinctions between the two could be lost. (Lifton 2017, 30-31)

Indeed, despite noticing this “surprising” parallel decades ago, it wasn't until recently that Lifton turned his attention explicitly to climate change. He speculates whether he himself was not “held back by a faith in the ultimate stability of nature” (Ibid, 15), although he is now convinced that “[c]limate change confronts us with the most disturbing and unique psychological task ever faced by humankind” (Ibid, xii).

Drawing a parallel between theories of climate denial (like Norgaard's) that suggest a cognitive dissonance between the functional environment that many take for granted and the future projections of climate crisis, Lifton (Ibid, 46) suggests an

“*ecological dissonance* in our relationship to the natural world” to explain denial: “These mental struggles can cause us to feel deeply insecure in our natural home and experience ourselves as floating, as lacking grounding for ourselves and our...institutions.” For psychologists Immo Fritsche and Katrin Häfner (2012, 572), moreover, perceived existential threats like climate change often compel people to double down on their basic assumptions, and even deny that human beings are really part of nature: “This symbolically releases humans from the realm of mortal nature and may thus induce a sense of immortality and thereby buffer existential anxiety.”

Even in less extreme forms, however, climate anxiety seems a likely prompt for denial. Indeed, the manifestations of anxiety can be quite subtle and beyond notice precisely because it affects the socio-cultural structures of existence buried deep in the soils of everyday experience. The existential implications of climate change don’t merely speak to the individual’s concrete experience of things, but rather to the collective background *against which* one experiences the world as a comprehensive whole.

Phenomenologists call this intersubjective background the lifeworld. Norgaard’s ethnographic research, moreover, suggests that the affective dimensions of climate change speak to an uncanny disturbance of the integrity of this background, which recommends her work to existentialism. Offering an existential-phenomenological interpretation of Norgaard’s work, therefore, I argue the implications of climate change are largely received as an existential threat to lifeworld identity, and the anxiety that signals this threat serves to shut down the kind of ethical reflection ultimately needed to take responsibility.

To get a sense of how one copes with ontological insecurity (i.e., threats to lifeworld identity), let's briefly consider the existential problem in light of Martin Heidegger's analysis of "being in the world" before turning to phenomenology in the next section. First, notice that when life's routines are running smoothly, people tend to take things for granted. Thanks to the skills, habits, and sensibilities integrated in the normative background of lifeworld experience, we know intuitively that what worked last time will probably work next time as well. Hence, there's no need to constantly notice things we're already familiar with and spend time and energy reflecting on them. For this reason, unless we're dissatisfied with something or think we can improve it, we're often not conscious of the *particularities* of everyday experience in the foreground so long as everything is happening as expected. To take Heidegger's famous example, when hammering something, what stands out to consciousness is the project to be completed, not the hammer itself. The hammer isn't explicitly experienced as a thing of wood and metal, for instance. Rather, we simply take up the hammer unreflectively and relate to it as if it were an extension of our own bodies. Similarly, it's revealing that when we experience a fender-bender, we usually say "I got hit"—not "my *car* got hit while I was in it." If the car or hammer is an integral part of the lifeworld situating us in the world we feel at home in, we naturally experience it as *part of us*.<sup>51</sup>

As long as things make sense and expectations in life are generally met in practice, people meaningfully identify with the world situating their everyday involvements and belong to accordingly. So what distinguishes secure from insecure

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<sup>51</sup> This insight speaks to what Ulich Neisser's (1988) calls the "ecological self" in his essay "Five Kinds of Self Knowledge."

ways of being in the world? This can be discerned, among other ways, by how people cope with the unexpected in life. Consider first, Heidegger (1962, 103) says, that it's often not until some disruption "stands in the way of our concern" that we become fully conscious of what was previously backgrounded. When the hammer breaks, for instance, our attention shifts from the project previously focusing our concerns to the hammer *itself*. Usually, it's only when the natural flow of our projects gets interrupted by something unexpected that we experience the hammer as indeed *separate* from us—as a thing of wood and metal, say, that needs repair. Yet, breakdowns occur at different levels in life and require different responses accordingly—and this is the point I want to drive home with regards to climate change.

Just as we have to make a distinction between 'climate' as a background condition and 'weather' as a foreground expression of it, so too we need to make a distinction between the *general* structures of the lifeworld that order experience and the *particular* things that make sense to individuals against this collective background. For example, when particular things like hammers or cars break, we can simply fix them or get new ones. Specific problems at this foreground level can be handled consciously by the individual. Indeed, cultural consumerism immediately prompts us to buy a replacement, and living in capitalist societies of mass production often make it easy and affordable to do so in practice. But what happens when the hammer works fine, but using it to *add on to the house* becomes an issue because a larger house—requiring more energy to heat—will increase carbon emissions? This is a different problem "standing in the way of our concern," requiring a different kind of response. Or what happens when the car works but, in light of climate change, one's *everyday driving routines* become

questionable? Connect enough dots and you will discover that these far more general problems cannot be handled by individuals alone because here it is the *socio-cultural projects* normative to lifeworld identity that are problematic—not just the particular things that stand out against this larger background.

Insofar as the normative implications of climate change challenge one's most basic background assumptions and routines, systemic issues like climate change cannot simply be treated as a problem to be handled consciously and deliberately, if only individuals had sufficient knowledge and will-power. Unlike broken hammers and cars, we don't initially become conscious of existential problems affecting lifeworld experience in order to fix them. Instead, as Heidegger explains, we become insecure and anxious, often without knowing why or even noticing. And to the extent that the deeper implications of climate change affect the everyday assumptions and routines shared with others, the anxiety that people experience is likely to be shared as well. As Norgaard's ethnographic findings suggest, this is why we have to work with others also trying to cope with the unsettling implications of a totalizing threat like this in order to keep it together. If these implications do indeed threaten the continuity of collective existence by disrupting lifeworld integrity, the anxiety that signals this existential insecurity isn't something we can cope with by ourselves. Precisely because the lifeworld is *intersubjective* (as discussed in the following section), problems that affect it cannot be addressed in direct, unmediated ways. Climate change is an intersubjective issue, therefore, to the extent that it uproots existential assumptions shared in common.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Consequently, any viable ethical responses to it must likewise be intersubjective. Bottom-up community dialogue and involvement, rather than the directives of top-down monologue issued by experts and politicians, is the appropriate response to a problem like this.

Hence, an existential phenomenology of climate denial that locates the barriers to collective action at the lifeworld level of collective (socio-cultural) identity, should diagnose these barriers as existential in nature.

Yet, recalling Jamieson and Gardiner's macro-level analysis of institutional barriers critiqued in chapter two, it has to be stressed again that the implications of climate change aren't received uniformly by a homogenous public all assuming the same lifeworld identity. Moving beyond the collective "self" (casually referenced by McKibben) threatened by the systemic implications of climate change requires a clear recognition that people don't equally identify with "the system" causing climate change. Indeed, when turning to a more nuanced account of the existential barriers to collective action and particularly to the challenges of overcoming them in practice, an overly-generalized account of lifeworld identity isn't going to clearly explain the *hold* that these existential conditions have on different people. Recognizing this point requires bringing sociological definition to the existential problem generically described above from the perspective of lived experience.

Indeed, research on demographic differences in climate denial may support the view that the forms of collective identity most threatened by the existential implications of climate change reflect differences in institutionalized power and privilege (Dunlap 1998; Kahan, et al. 2007; Leiserowitz and Akerlof 2010; McCright 2010; McCright and Dunlap 2011; Norgaard 2012; Pew Research Center 2013; Sandvik 2008). It may not be shocking to those familiar with the state of climate politics over the last decade (particularly in Anglophone countries (Mooney 2014)) that conservatives have become far more skeptical of the science or social implications of this issue than liberals and

progressives.<sup>53</sup> But differences in gender, race, class, and nationality are also significant factors independently of partisan factors (Pearson et al. 2017). All things considered, privileged groups are more likely to deny or minimize the reality and gravity of this issue than their relatively marginalized counterparts. Insofar as socio-cultural institutions are responsible for collective inaction on climate change, it seems that questions of institutionalized power and collective identity figure prominently in this regard.

Irina Feygina and Rachel Goldsmith (2010), for instance, draw on “system-justification theory” to explain this phenomenon. According to system justification theory, institutions not only satisfy economic needs but also security needs (to feel safe and reassured) and social needs (to affiliate with others). This is especially true for those who generally benefit from these institutions compared to others. Hence, within these demographics, there’s a tendency to react defensively against news of climate change to the extent that it is perceived as a threat to “the very foundations of our socioeconomic system” (Ibid, 327). Unfortunately, these authors conclude with recommendations to frame climate change pragmatically as a problem that can be solved without disturbing disruptions in the status quo.<sup>54</sup> Another study by Kirsti Jylhä and Nazar Akrami (2015) applies a different theoretical framework called “social dominance orientation” (SDO) to explain the institutional significance of climate inaction. Previous studies, they note, have found that institutionally advantaged individuals and groups tend to display hierarchical attitudes toward other groups. Other researchers, moreover, have found correlations

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<sup>53</sup> Differences in age among conservative Republicans, however, are significant (Funk and Heferon 2018).

<sup>54</sup> As I detail in the next chapter, this general tendency is very common in communication strategies to motivate a public response to climate change.

between SDO tendencies and attitudes that affirm human dominion over nature. Against this background of research, Jylhä and Akrami found a positive correlation between SDO and climate denial. Insofar as the implications of climate change challenge those that exemplify SDO tendencies, one might very well expect this positive correlation. Insofar as the very institutions central to the climate crisis are also charged with maintaining social relations of power and privilege, these findings make sense. *Prima facie*, at least, power appears to be a common factor intertwining social and socio-ecological relations, and this systemic continuity influences basic perceptions of the climate situation.<sup>55</sup>

Although I do not conclude from sociological studies like these that the existential problem is exclusive to privileged demographics (power and history aren't the only factors, as I argue more fully in the final chapter), I do hold that the lifeworld conflict signaling an existential crisis is more likely to play a decisive role here. This is where we might reasonably expect motives for climate denial to exert a particularly strong (and conspicuous) pull—where, for instance, we might find some people more compelled than others to perform the mental gymnastics required to buffer themselves from the totalizing implications of this systemic issue.

The larger point to be made here, however, is this: discerning the essential dynamics operating in the background of collective experience and judging the hold that existing institutions have on people with different socio-cultural backgrounds requires a paradigm of the hegemonic structures of lifeworld identity to inaugurate this kind of

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<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the research mentioned in this paragraph roundly supports the argument made in the previous chapter that the failures of “institutionalized environmentalism” to address the systemic roots of climate change partly reflect their socio-cultural position in—and identification with—the system responsible for the crisis. It was partly on this basis, recall, that I argued for a bottom-up theory of socio-cultural change sensitive to structural differences in power to redefine the collective action problem.

nuance. Hence, in constructing what Max Weber calls an “ideal type,” it makes sense to begin by asking more precisely what “the system” ultimately *means* to those who identify with it most strongly. The task here isn’t, say, to psychoanalyze executives in the fossil fuel industry. It involves articulating the larger socio-cultural project that grounds desires to “add onto the house,” for instance, in common with one’s “driving routines”—and indeed the countless other everyday activities that define collective existence in the industrialized countries most responsible for climate change. What, exactly, is being threatened in the background most incisively and potently when climate anxieties start bubbling to the surface?

Taking cues from Jylhä and Akrami’s study of the correlation between social dominance orientation and climate denial, I submit that the hegemonic structures of lifeworld identity threatened most by the systemic implications of climate change find their socio-cultural coherence in assumptions about *human dominion over nature*. This, as I argue in the next section (and in the final chapter), might very well qualify as the defining socio-cultural project of industrial modernity in the broadest sense. There is an extent to which this lifeworld project functions as the normative glue intertwining the social and cultural motives driving climate change as a material reality and climate denial as an existential problem. Importantly, moreover, this project of “human” dominion over “nature” is inextricably tied to domineering *social* relations since, in Western culture, it is precisely the privileged demographics (white, male, wealthy, etc.) that have been traditionally perceived as more ‘human’ than their relatively ‘natural’ (i.e. “subhuman”)

counterparts.<sup>56</sup> That is (as I argue later in this chapter), the lifeworld meaning of “human dominion over nature” in the industrialized world responsible for climate change doesn’t just signify domineering socio-ecological relations but just as importantly domineering social relations as well.

In the final chapter, I ultimately propose a comprehensive lifeworld alternative to domineering relations by advancing a “dialogical partnership” model of being in the social and socio-ecological world. Defining the existential problem at this level of socio-cultural comprehension, however, first requires laying the philosophical groundwork for such a confrontation with the climate situation. As I state in chapter one and suggest in chapter two in response to Jamieson and Gardiner, the philosophical structures undergirding traditional theory simply aren’t equipped to fully handle the question of climate response. In what follows, therefore, I introduce Husserl’s phenomenology of the lifeworld as a promising philosophical approach to what I consider the most pressing question of our time, with special attention to socio-cultural assumptions about ‘nature’ and the human relationship to it that have become hegemonic since the Industrial Revolution.<sup>57</sup> But the promise of a lifeworld analysis of the existential problem is double-edged. For in the process of clearing fresh space for new answers to the question of climate response, I’m ultimately led to conclude that the existential crisis of lifeworld

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<sup>56</sup> This logic probably finds clearest expression in perceptions of indigenous “savages” by “civilized” European settlers, but also includes people of color, women, peasants, the working poor, and other historically marginalized groups.

<sup>57</sup> This thesis is taken up again in the final chapter where I draw on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of a “matrix event” as a sweeping socio-cultural gestalt shift in lifeworld existence that, in his view, occurred with industrial revolution.

identity defining the problem at hand is considerably unique in human history and perhaps even more intractable than it seems at this point.

***Husserl's Phenomenology of Lifeworld Identity: From Intentionality to***

***Intersubjectivity***

In my view, phenomenology is distinctive in the tradition of Western thought as a medium between the disciplined commitment to phenomena motivating scientific investigation and the pursuit of meaningful comprehension motivating philosophical reflection. Arguably, this ambition culminates in the lifeworld concept originally developed by Edmund Husserl. But more importantly for present purposes, confronting the challenges of collectivizing ethical motivation on climate change from a lifeworld perspective affords philosophical entry to the problems identified in the previous chapter. This meso-level approach holds promise as an account of the ways in which the institutions analyzed by Jamieson and Gardiner are intersubjectively embodied by different communities of collective experience. It is precisely at this intersubjective level of collective identity, I submit, that cultural and social institutions find mutual reinforcement in the face of systemic climate change. This is precisely why they function so powerfully as existential barriers to a problem-driven response. In this connection, a lifeworld analysis of the socio-cultural challenges of climate response suggests a kind of existential crisis in the making that, in important respects, seems quite novel on the stage of human history. However, to the extent that the lifeworld concept marks a significant turn from the traditional logic of Western thought confounded by the paradoxes of

inaction, it's important to first introduce Husserl's phenomenology in some depth as an appropriate philosophical alternative.<sup>58</sup>

Lifeworld identity and experience, to begin with, is multi-layered. It is socio-cultural in historical evolution and intersubjective in comprehension, yet sensitive to structural differences in collective experience and motivation. As such, it can be said that this concept mediates the socio-cultural generality of historical existence and the local specificity of material conditions motivating group and personal experience more concretely. Hence, as I explain in further in the final chapter when bringing in Merleau-Ponty, the lifeworld expresses something like a background/foreground relation that, depending on context, can be relatively steady (conservative) over time or else evolve quite dynamically. Perhaps the most important point to be made here with respect to the climate issue concerns the normative quality of self-evidence or reification of things in the "foreground" of experience afforded by the "background" of lifeworld existence. It is precisely against the pregiven structures hidden in background that things appear immediately and intuitively obvious to "everybody" in one's experience, as opposed to the products of conscious reflection or interpretation. This self-evidence is what enables people to live and communicate together in a world of real things, but things that are normatively contextualized according to the socio-cultural institutions affording common meaning to existence more generally.

In addition to being multi-layered in structure, lifeworld identity is also multifaceted in expression. That is, the normative background structures of lifeworld

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<sup>58</sup> Taking the time to offer this philosophical introduction is also important considering the consequential influence Husserl's lifeworld phenomenology had on Heidegger and especially Merleau-Ponty, who I also rely on to philosophically reformulate the collective action problem on climate change.

identity that give experience its pregiven comprehension find expression across multiple domains of everyday life. Husserl, for instance, could analyze perception, consciousness, behavior, thought, etc., as different expressions of a given lifeworld. With respect to spatial perception, for instance, the lifeworld constitutes the unnoticed background against which things show up in experience as noticeable—sensible, meaningful, intelligible. A cube, to take Husserl’s example, is perceived as a three-dimensional whole (against the background of lifeworld experience) even though the physical object itself can only present three of its six facets to the senses at any given time. Considering what Husserl calls “time-consciousness,” moreover, the lifeworld enables one to make sense of situations in the present against a temporal background that connects past experiences to future ideals and possibilities worth striving for. With respect to behavior, the lifeworld is the passive background of habituated predispositions against which intentional activity takes place in response to the contingencies of a given situation. And reflection, to take a final example, takes form against a pre-conceptual background of sensibilities.

All things considered, then, it could also be said that these background relations embody the ingrained cultural assumptions and social practices against which people make comprehensive sense of the world and their lives in it. By enabling people to “naturally” make sense of things across multiple domains, the normative coherence and continuity structured by this socio-cultural background makes experience reliable and directs existence smoothly. This lifeworld coherence speaks directly to Heidegger’s (1962) formulation of “being-in-the-world,” and this is precisely what affords the ontological security needed to live with confidence and purpose.

With respect to consciousness, there is something like an inverse relation between the immediacy of everyday experience (lived in the “natural attitude”) and the institutionalized background structures that give life this normative quality of self-evidence. In some ways, the more obvious that things are in everyday life, the more concealed are the intersubjective background structures that make this self-evidence possible—and vice-versa. This inverse relation between self-evidence and socio-cultural background assumptions is more noticeable when observed from a distance (as when considering indigenous societies from one’s perspective in industrial society or pondering ancient Pagan or medieval Christian cultures of the distant past from the standpoint of modernity).

Now one of the most general structures affording lifeworld coherence/identity in the industrialized world responsible for climate change concerns socio-cultural assumptions about ‘nature’ and the human relationship to it. Indeed, different lifeworld assumptions about nature strongly inform different relations to the world of collective experience more broadly. Hence, from the modern perspective basic to the industrial world, the pre- or non-modern traditions mentioned above may seem obviously “wrong” or inconceivable largely to the extent that they are founded on very different lifeworld assumptions about nature. Speaking quite generally, there’s a sense in which Pagans and indigenous peoples have tended to focus human existence on more organic relations to nature (relations of belonging) while otherworldly Christian traditions have tended to focus human existence on the supernatural realm beyond nature (relations of transcendence). Citizens of the modern secular world of industrialism, by contrast, tend to focus human existence on instrumental relations to nature for the sake of maximizing

material production (relations of dominion). Although all three founding lifeworld assumptions about nature and the human relation to it continue to find expression in the industrialized world, the latter relation is certainly the more hegemonic and thus self-evident one (particularly within privileged demographics). In most situations, for example, a detailed and well-researched argument isn't needed to push "sensible" market-based technological solutions to climate change, but proposals that question economic growth and consumerism would struggle to find an ear regardless of supporting arguments. Arguably, as a background foundation structuring one's everyday being in the world, this controlling or domineering orientation to nature is at once the lifeworld relation most concealed in self-evidence *and* the most responsible for systemic problems like climate change. This point, I contend, is essential to understanding climate change as an existential threat to lifeworld identity in the industrialized world responsible for it.

Indeed, Husserl is an appropriate figure to turn to in this regard for a phenomenology of the existential problem for multiple reasons. Not only did he develop phenomenology as a philosophical position in general and the lifeworld concept in particular, but he largely did so by unearthing the basic assumptions about 'nature' concealed in the background of modern experience today. Husserl's lifeworld genealogy of nature thus affords introduction to his phenomenology as it generally relates to the existential problem. With an eye to the final chapter, moreover, a philosophical examination of Husserl's phenomenology is worth undertaking here to the extent that it helps lay the groundwork for an ontology of climate agency premised on a socio-cultural philosophy of motivation.

However, appreciating the significance of his lifeworld phenomenology of nature—and ultimately appreciating phenomenology as an alternative to problematic accounts of climate inaction—requires a brief philosophical excursus for context. As such, I begin with an account of the philosophical development of Husserl’s notion of the lifeworld as it spans his breakthrough conception of *intentionality* and his subsequent focus on *intersubjectivity*. The significance of intentionality to the dissertation project, I submit, is that it promises a way out of the impasse between subjectivist and objectivist assumptions of human motivation, and thus climate inaction. Turning to the problem of intersubjectivity, by contrast, allows us to better understand the way social and cultural institutions mutually reinforce and challenge one another in the background of lifeworld existence. This socio-cultural intertwining is precisely what motivates common ways of relating to the world of collective experience that, depending on context, is sometimes conservative and at other times transformative.<sup>59</sup> From this standpoint, we can see Husserl’s lifeworld genealogy of nature as a socio-cultural foundation central to intersubjectively orienting domineering relations to the world—and functioning as an existential barrier to confronting the climate problem accordingly.

As Husserl scholar Klaus Held (2003) explains, the larger philosophical project subtending Husserl’s lifeworld genealogy of nature is rooted in the phenomenological problem of objectivity. This problem didn’t just motivate Husserl’s concept of the lifeworld late in life, it motivated the larger project of his entire career as the founder of phenomenology. Hence, it would be helpful to begin where Husserl did. The problem of objectivity (i.e., how to define the real) ultimately speaks to the human relation to the

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<sup>59</sup> This is partly why I focus attention in the second chapter on distinguishing cultural and social motivations.

world of experience in ways that traverse questions of epistemology and metaphysics. In the context of Western philosophy as it culminates in Descartes' mind/body dualism (but with deeper roots in Greek metaphysics), phenomenology was intended to mediate the subjectivism of idealist thought and the objectivist stance of empiricism. The basic logic of empiricism rests on the assumption that experience begins with objective things in the "real" world as recorded by the body's sense organs. The most consistent idealists, by contrast, generally argue that things are mentally constructed by the subjects of experience. Starting with this two-term logic of subjects and objects, working out a consistent philosophical position within this framework could only be achieved by assuming what is effectively a one-way relation from one term to the other (i.e., either the *object* → *subject* relation characteristic of empiricism or the *subject* → *object* relation defining idealism). Hence, either the subject is constituted from without by the world of objects beyond it or the objective world is constituted subjectively from within.<sup>60</sup>

However, philosophers since Kant have increasingly realized that neither position fully accounts for experience, and many worked accordingly to reconcile the subject/object dualism structuring this untenable divide. For Husserl early in his career, it was Franz Brentano's struggle with this divide that inspired his particularly decisive insight. According to Brentano, conscious experience is neither the product of objective sense data nor the property of the subject. Rather, consciousness is a *directedness* or *orientation* to the world. Hence, experience is neither passively received nor actively constructed but is rather an "intentional" relation to the world. To *intend* something is, in

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<sup>60</sup> In practice, these positions aren't so simple. At some point, the complexities of the subject matter have to factor in to nuance a given stance. Nevertheless, the logic orienting each starting point is generally consistent.

common parlance, to act with purpose—i.e. to express agency. To *mean* to do something, moreover, is to relate to it as meaningful or sensible. This, in turn, requires one to have a history with something, to be familiar with it—that is, to have a *relationship* with it. Indeed, references throughout the dissertation to social and socio-ecological relations—and more broadly, relations to the world—have to be generally understood as “intentional” in this basic sense.

Brentano, however, struggled like his predecessors to come to terms with the nature of this relation. One could, for instance, easily reproduce dualistic assumptions by asking: does intentionality *direct itself*, so that agency is located primarily in the subject, or is intentionality predominantly *directed by* situations in the objective world? As explained by Dagfinn Føllesdal (1982), Brentano struggled with the ideal vs. real divide when trying to articulate an intentional subject/object relation. By defining intentionality as “the reference to a content, a direction upon an object,” Brentano ran into difficulties when it came to objects that didn't actually exist, such as hallucinations or the concept of a centaur (Ibid, 93). How could there be a *directedness* towards such mental phenomena? Brentano responded that the object's reality was of no consequence because the object itself was contained in the mental (intentional) act—the object, as such, “intentionally inexists.” To his critics, however, this implied that objects were merely in one's head—that consciousness doesn't reach the things themselves. As Føllesdal (Ibid, 73-74) explains: “whereas the view that the object of acts are real leads to difficulties in the case of centaurs and hallucinations, the view that the objects are unreal...leads to difficulties in the case of many other acts, e.g., acts of normal perception: it seems that, on this view, what we see when we see a tree is not the real tree in front of us but something else,

which we would also have seen if we had been hallucinating.” Brentano ultimately concluded that the objects of intentionality were indeed real, and not just mental. But his theory always remained problematic because he offered no satisfactory way to explain *how* these real objects were intentionally grasped by consciousness.

It was precisely within the fissures opened up by Brentano’s dilemma that Husserl makes his decisive breakthrough. Whereas Brentano was left with only the two terms of subject and object, Husserl hoped to resolve the dilemma by introducing a third term, the “noema,” to mediate the subjective and objective aspects of experience. The noema is the meaning structure that makes everyday experience in the “natural attitude” intelligible (and ultimately constitutes the hidden background relations that familiarize people with the world and orients them accordingly). Hence, there are subjects and objects (real and ideal objects), but it is the noema—the generalized *meaning* of objects and that which enables subjects to *identify* objects as such—that directs consciousness *to* them. In Platonic terms, it is the universal form (*eidōs*) of which particular objects are but specimens that enables one to recognize them for what they are. If there were only individual subjects confronted with particular objects, the former could not be directed towards the latter.

To revisit the simple example of spatial perception mentioned earlier, if one did not have a general (mediating) grasp of the meaning of ‘cube,’ one would not immediately recognize real cubes for what they are. Again, only half of a cube can be presented to vision at any given time (the half facing one’s eyes), and yet it is naturally perceived as a solid three-dimensional whole. Likewise, baseballs are recognized as spheres, not white circles. So how is three-dimensional perception possible? With enough

visual (and tactile, etc.) experience with cubes in general, the constitution of ‘cube’ as such enables consciousness to intentionally “fill in” the unseen back side of the cube so that it *appears* in perception as the three-dimensional object that it is. Indeed, even two-dimensional drawings of cubes are naturally perceived in three dimensions (unless the spell of perception is broken by abstracting oneself from the image by actively concentrating on it). To the extent that one is familiar with—or has a noematic relation to—‘cubes’, what counts is not just the “object which *is* intended” or the “object *as* it is intended,” but rather their *mutual confirmation* in the natural flow of everyday experience.<sup>61</sup> To the extent that repeated experience confirms one’s earliest experiences with certain objects as in fact ‘cubes’ (e.g., after walking around them to see their other side or by turning cubes around in one’s hands to feel their solidity), one’s perceptual confidence or faith that *things that initially look like cubes are in fact cubes* grows to the point where intentional perception becomes virtually automatic or, as we say, “natural.” No matter from what angle I happen to glimpse a given cube, it is immediately perceived as the three-dimensional whole that it, in fact, is.

Importantly, the confirmation of something like a cube in repeated encounters speaks to the *embodied*—not just mental—nature of meaningful experience, as when physically walking around the cube to see the backside or holding it in one’s hands to familiarize ourselves with it.<sup>62</sup> As intentional beings at the very first moment of

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<sup>61</sup> As we shall see with respect to lifeworld identity, this phenomenon finds intersubjective expression in the mutual confirmation of social and cultural institutions. Hence, to the extent that the ethical and ontological implications of climate change challenge this socio-cultural confirmation, we are confronted with the existential problem.

<sup>62</sup> Compared to the phenomenological analysis outlined above, which Husserl (2013) largely introduces in his book *Ideas*, his focus on embodied perception can be found in *Ideas II* (1989). Incidentally, the latter

perception, there is a sense in which we can “put ourselves” on the other side of the cube or “put the cube” in our hands, as it were. When we see a tree, to take a slightly more complex example, we *sense* in our very bodies, so to speak, that we *could* walk around the tree, climb up its branches, pick its leaves, dig down to its roots, etc. This is what it means to have a meaningful, intentional grasp or relation with ‘trees’ in general—and the world they belong to more generally still.

To take another example that includes but exceeds spatial perception, consider one’s embodied grasp of the meaning of a ‘house’ as, let’s say, *something built for the purposes of home dwelling*. Like the cube, experience with houses in general enable people to recognize ‘that juxtaposition of wood over there arranged in a certain way’ as, in fact, a house. In contrast to the cube example, however, houses can differ radically in appearance around the world. But more importantly, to the extent that the meaning of ‘house’ centers more on its everyday *function* (its purpose for home dwelling) and less on its sensual or spatial appearance, one can recognize something as a house even if they have never *seen* anything like it before. This, presumably, would not be the case for a nomadic people (in the Neolithic Period, let us imagine) who have no need to construct such dwellings and who have had no contact with those who do. Without that intentional relationship to things “built for home dwelling,” no perception of “a house” could take place, let alone any communication about “that house over there.”

Like Plato, the noematic structures of consciousness for Husserl are therefore “transcendent”—they implicate but *go beyond* sense data as such. But unlike Plato, this

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work influenced Merleau-Ponty’s turn to embodiment and in particular his conception of motivation, which is central to the final chapter of this dissertation.

transcendence is not otherworldly or purely mental but embodied. It is habituated or socialized largely in the material contexts of practical experience. And so the difference between traditional subjectivism and Husserl's position is that the former, as dualistic, doesn't allow subjects to truly *relate* to the world in any thickly mediated way. The noema, however, does precisely this by *situating* the subject in a material world that certainly exceeds it, but is made comprehensible against a larger background in which some things "stands out" as significant in space and time while everything else goes unnoticed as insignificant.

In marked contrast to the traditional logic of subjective and objective relations, then, there is a "how" to intentionality that makes all the difference—a "how" that cannot be exclusively located on the side of the subject or of the world. This "how" is best understood in terms of relationality. As Aron Gurwitsch (1982, 65) explains: "Relatedness to essentially nonmental entities is the very nature of mental states." In this sense, Husserl "constitutes a break with the tradition" because "consciousness can no longer be interpreted as a self-contained domain of interiority" (Ibid, 66). Here, we see that both the identity of perceptual meaning and the differences in actual perception belong together relationally. It is the noema, therefore, that affords the "thickness" of relationality. Subjects cannot relate to objects that are simply present before them or presented to them, with no transcendental thickness beyond pure sensation. Intentional relations require a directedness *towards*, an attunement *of*, and a history of engagement *with*. The noema, as articulating a comprehensive world that is nevertheless a world of identifiable particulars, is the missing element for Husserl that allows subjects to distinguish themselves from the world of objects (difference) and nevertheless intimately

relate to them as such (identity). Ultimately, the noema gives us access to a world in depth. Precisely because the noema enables consciousness to abstract itself from the world, we embody a world that transcends us.

Here we might pause to wonder what the noematic structures of ‘climate change’ are and how they orient one’s intentional relation to this issue. What, we might ask, is the general meaning(s) of the climate situation guiding the way we typically perceive, think, talk, and feel about this issue in all its implications? Of course, the meaning of climate change is far more complex in structure than the perception of cubes and houses. Considering the historic and systemic depths of this collective problem, approaching questions about public relations to climate change from the perspective of a “constituting consciousness” seems radically inadequate. The comprehensive nature of the climate issue seems instead to require an *institutional* analysis.

Indeed, after centering his early career on the intentional nature of the “constituting consciousness,” Husserl encountered limits to his position when turning his attention to collectivistic phenomena. Although noematic structures of consciousness are shared in common, his pointed focus on the intentional “ego” left him struggling to account for how these structures could be constituted in common with *other* “consciousnesses.” It’s at this point, when the problem of objectivity becomes the problem of intersubjectivity, that Husserl introduces the lifeworld concept. As Held (2003, 48) writes:

What mainly interests Husserl here is the possibility of objectivity; how can objects appear the same way in spite of people’s different experiential situations? Asked more radically: how can we explain the fact that not only does every individual consciousness have an experiential world that is exclusively its own, but together they also possess an experienced world that is common to them all, that is, a universal horizon that surrounds their subjective horizons?”

The noematic structures making the perception of objects like cubes or houses possible don't just develop person by person or consciousness by consciousness. People with unique personal histories nevertheless experience objects in common because the meaning of things are *essentially* collective. This is particularly evident once attention shifts from how specific things are constituted in personal experience to more general questions about, for instance, how cultural assumptions and social practices develop more-or-less *comprehensively* over time and become common to "everyone." Ultimately, we might ask, how do collective identities emerge over time and reliably sustain historical continuity?

To address the problem of intersubjectivity, Husserl had to transition his methodology from a "static" analysis of how things appear in the present to a "genetic" investigation of how the world of things become institutionalized or "founded" in relation to others over time to form this common background. To begin with, the notion of foundation with respect to background relations means that lifeworld experience develops across multiple layers. And the most intersubjectively coherent, durable, and thus reliable structures of lifeworld experience are socio-cultural in nature. The more general background structures (or layers) of intersubjective identity, in other words, concern the way cultural assumptions and social practices find mutual confirmation in everyday life.<sup>63</sup>

Individual forms of consciousness and agency are not determined in their specificity by this intersubjective background, but they are certainly conditioned by it in their generality. It's one thing to account for the perception of things and quite another to

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<sup>63</sup> Husserl doesn't employ the term "socio-cultural." Although the 'social' and 'cultural' are meant to be philosophically compatible with the phenomenological tradition, my use of this distinction is my own.

account for highly general and abstract assumptions about *nature*, say, or human nature, human history, the good life, the good society, and so on. So with respect to the problem of objectivity in particular, how does the meaning of ‘nature’ in its most abstract metaphysical form become intersubjectively assumed over time? Again, considering the question of lifeworld identity (especially as it relates to climate inaction as an existential problem), the socio-cultural meaning of nature holds a central place. Husserl (1970, §9) introduces the lifeworld concept in philosophical detail in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, and in so doing he offers a genealogy of the meaning of nature stretching from the “pure geometry” developed by the Greeks to the “mathematization of nature” culminating with Galileo. This basic concept is not only essential to orienting Western science in particular but I would add Western existence more generally. Significantly, moreover, the emergence of this lifeworld concept wasn’t just a cultural creation borne from detached reflection, but also occurred in the practical or material contexts of social existence. As an institution in the deepest sense, the lifeworld structure of nature is profoundly socio-cultural in historical origin and in expression today. Indeed, to anticipate my argument, there is an extent to which this traditional lifeworld foundation is essential to maintaining ontological security today.

In the case of pure geometry, for instance, we note first that the ‘perfect circle’ is nowhere to be found in the material world of sensual experience, but neither was this notion simply conjured up in thought by reflective individuals in brilliant moments of mental detachment. Again, the logic of empiricism and idealism aren’t sufficient. For Husserl, the perfect circle is an idealization that emerged intersubjectively over time within a praxis of measurement. That is, the ideal of the perfect circle first emerged as a

material need that was rooted in the everyday contexts of accomplishing certain practical goals in social life. The art of making a good wheel, for example, required ideals of measurement based on what constitutes the best possible shape for rolling. The closer this art of measurement came to perfect circularity, the better the wheel worked in practice. Eventually, the norm (or noematic structure) of the perfect circle became reified as a “cultural object.” Along with other idealized objects, like the perfectly straight line, the Greek lifeworld was already preparing the idea of a universal science through the development of pure geometry long before it was eventually formalized by figures like Euclid. In time, the practical nature that originally gave rise to the meaning of perfect circles and straight lines were to become institutionalized or backgrounded to such an extent that they concealed themselves in the form of self-evident, unquestioned truths.

In sharp contrast to another lifeworld assumption rooted in Greek metaphysics (i.e., that consciousness is prior to and determines practical action), Husserl’s genetic phenomenology emphasizes the socio-practical origins of the perfect circle as a cultural foundation. It would be a mistake, however, to simply reverse the one-sided idealist tendencies of this tradition to conclude that cultural objects are primarily rooted in social or material contexts. It could be noted, for instance, that the practical goals of measurement that led to the idealized foundations of geometry also occurred in a traditional cultural context. In particular, the possibility of a “pure geometry” is entirely compatible with religious Greek assumptions that, despite appearances, the universe itself is ultimately a *kosmos* of perfect order.<sup>64</sup> All things considered, then, the emergence of

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<sup>64</sup> Indeed, one can imagine cosmological assumptions unconsciously informing the practical measures that would eventually become reified in the form of pure geometry, only for these cultural objects to subsequently appear self-evidently as “discoveries” of the true nature of the cosmos all along.

geometry occurred in a *socio-cultural* milieu. Furthermore, its reification and survival through the ages required continuous reinforcement via the cultural assumptions and social practices of subsequent generations.

While the Greeks instituted the cultural objects of pure geometry, for Husserl it was Galileo that idealized ‘nature’ for the modern age in terms of geometrical space and time. To begin with, the “mathematization of nature” is central to the lifeworld project informing modern scientific practice. Indeed, along with the mathematization of nature came the mathematization of experience more generally, as with the introduction of maps to standardize spatial frames of reference and the use of mechanical clocks to regulate time beyond sensual experience. It was because Galileo could, by his time, naturally assume the idealized objects of geometry bequeathed by antiquity that he was able to develop and institute the mathematization of nature that succeeding scientists would take for granted (especially in Husserl’s time).

Over time, achievements such as these were intersubjectively taken up and synthesized into an overall style that expressed an ontological sense of the world (or, in Heidegger’s words, certain ways of being in the world). Again, once habituated in the form of lifeworld traditions, original meanings that were once the products of conscious reflection and practical problem-solving skills become buried in self-evidence as taken-for-granted structures of meaning charged with regulating experience seamlessly and naturally. For Husserl, this is a problem. Long before Thomas Kuhn announced the ‘paradigm’ concept, Husserl recognized that the original meaning of the scientific project gets covered over as the ideal objects it relies on become reified in scientific theory and routinized in the technical procedures of scientific practice. When this happens, he

argues, scientists tend to judge results primarily in terms of theoretical paradigms and routine procedure, as opposed to being carefully attuned to what the *phenomena*—the things themselves—disclose.

Beyond the implications for science that focused Husserl's analysis, the mathematization of nature since Galileo's time has become a much larger force in the industrialized world. As a lifeworld foundation, for instance, it's important to stress that the structural meaning of 'nature' isn't reducible to its cultural function. In addition to enabling Western culture to comprehend the natural world at highly abstract levels of conception, the mathematization of nature also serves the social function of organizing practical relations to it. Not just scientific but economic and technological practice operate under the basic lifeworld assumption that the natural order itself can be discovered in its determinacy and therefore controlled and manipulated in determinate ways to serve human ends. It is precisely in this *socio-cultural mutualism*, I submit, that the general meaning of nature disclosed in Husserl's genealogy is comprehensive enough to serve as a normative foundation for lifeworld identity in the industrialized world historically responsible for climate change and struggling to make sense of it today.

In addition to offering philosophical entry to a socio-cultural view of collective motivation, Husserl's genealogy is particularly significant for the purposes of this chapter because it points us to the background layers of lifeworld identity charged with maintaining ontological security. For Heidegger (1966), the existential meaning of 'nature' revealed in Husserl's phenomenology is quintessential to modernity as such to the extent that it finds expression in the *technological* project of human domination over the material world. This basic view, incidentally, was largely shared in one form or

another by Marxists in the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972), indigenous observers of white settler identity (Wildcat 2001), and informed generations of radical ecologists focused explicitly on systemic environmental and social problems like climate change (Merchant 2006). From this perspective, the mathematization—or, perhaps, the industrialization—of nature is essential to structuring the modern way of being in the world for many today, and thus essential to ensuring the integrity of lifeworld identity and maintaining ontological security. Hence, to the extent that the ethical and ontological implications of climate change might expose the grave but unintended consequences of this lifeworld project of dominion over nature, perhaps it should come as no surprise that anxieties might emerge to preemptively shut down such an encounter in self-defense. Along these lines, I thematize the existential problem more fully in the next section by offering a genealogy of the *human relationship to nature* as a lifeworld project threatened by the systemic implications of climate change.

### ***The Socio-cultural “Nature” of Lifeworld Identity and the New Existential Crisis***

Lifeworld identity isn't just an inheritance from the cultural past and a projection into the future, it is also *lived* in the practical routines of social existence. In this respect, the “mathematization of nature” is intersubjectively lived in the most historically durable sense to the extent that the cultural meaning of nature as a normative organizing principle (“worldview”) finds reliable confirmation in social—predominantly economic and technological—relations to nature, and vice versa. As previously discussed, however, the qualifier “to the extent that” needs to be emphasized, since the socio-cultural foundations of lifeworld identity hegemonic in any given time and place aren't assumed equally by all

people. The extent to which—and the ways in which—the hegemonic meaning of ‘nature’ disclosed in Husserl’s genealogy finds normative expression in lifeworld identity today is always influenced at the individual level by the contingencies of personal experience and at the collective level by socio-cultural differences in privilege and power. And yet, this essential qualification must itself be qualified in the face of climate change, a task that I mostly reserve for chapter five. Here, I’ll simply suggest that even those that explicitly reject the meaning of nature hegemonic in the industrialized world, or consciously refuse to identify with it, would struggle to do so consistently and effectively if pushed. In some ways, socio-cultural differences are central to questions of climate response, but are less so in other respects. At some level, for example, virtually everyone’s existence in the industrialized world largely depends on working with others in an economy premised on instrumental relations to nature (anthropocentric) and to others (egocentrism).<sup>65</sup> By directing attention to the multilayered structure of background relations, one of the important promises of a lifeworld approach is that it enables one to more carefully distinguish the historical significance of the climate situation where social and cultural differences are important from the material significance of the climate problem situating humanity—and indeed life—more generally.

With these caveats in mind, therefore, I trace an ideal type of lifeworld identity with respect to the socio-cultural foundations of ‘nature,’ and specifically the ‘human relation to nature,’ hegemonic in the industrialized world bearing responsible for climate

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<sup>65</sup> For those marginalized, the relatively pressing/oppressive demands of practical existence might outweigh motives to reflect on and discuss cultural assumptions about nature and the human relation to it. By contrast, those privileged with enough leisure time and security to participate in this kind of cultural inquiry tacitly rely on the material support provided by existing socio-economic relations—often without consciously acknowledging this. In each case, the weight of social and cultural motives differ. Again, I revisit this point more explicitly in the final chapter.

change. In so doing, I broadly examine the synergistic relation missed by Jamieson and Gardiner between the cultural and social institutions motivating inaction so powerfully—and conclude on these grounds that the climate problem represents an existential crisis that is arguably unique in human history. Having concluded my analysis of lifeworld identity as an existential barrier to motivating a problem-driven response to climate change, I return to Heidegger in the final section of this chapter for insight on the prospects of overcoming the ethical quandary of denial (and thereafter move on to the political quandary of transition in the next chapter).

In a certain respect, Carolyn Merchant’s historical analysis of “the death of nature” picks up where Husserl left off. While Galileo found himself in a position to assume the foundations of Greek geometry as self-evident and mathematize nature accordingly, other philosophers during this time were formulating this conception of nature more comprehensively as it relates to human existence. Specifically, the root metaphor of nature as a ‘machine’ was being developed by Gassendi, Mersenne, and Descartes to metaphysically justify human control, while others like Hobbes were crafting meta-narratives of ‘human progress’ from an original state of nature to normatively justify human dominion as an historical project.

As a cultural organizing principle, root metaphors conceptually model “a single cultural reality [or] worldview” by articulating the basic relation between self, society, and nature (Merchant 1980, xxii). Pre-modern conceptions of nature as an ‘organism,’ for instance, assume an *internal* relation between self, society, and nature as a comprehensive unity. Like the organs in a body, wholes take ontological priority over parts: individuals are thus subordinated to society, and society to nature. In sharp

contrast, the machine metaphor developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century expresses a philosophy of *external* relations that privileges parts over wholes. For Descartes, nature is an assemblage of passive atoms extrinsically governed by mathematical laws that ultimately transcends matter.

Critically, however, Merchant is clear that this cultural history emerged in a *social* context that included the rise of merchant capitalism and the modern nation state (just as the advent of geometry occurred in the social contexts of practical measurement). Furthermore, in the process of being established as common sense, the cultural project of top-down control made coherent by the machine metaphor found concrete expression in the social institutions that followed. Scientific methods intended to disclose the laws of nature, for instance, were increasingly applied in technological form to secure economic control over “natural resources” for the sake of expanding production. Mechanistic science brought conceptual order to “wild” nature, technology afforded power over nature, and capitalism organized socio-economic relations to commodify nature. Other social institutions—government, jurisprudence, education, media, etc.—have also been progressively assimilated to this end.<sup>66</sup>

The machine metaphor thus offered cultural support to the economic and political institutions struggling to emerge victorious at the dawn of modernity. To create a genuinely comprehensive culture, however, the mechanization of nature (so important to the emerging bourgeoisie) had to find normative grounding with *other* cultural assumptions over the centuries concerning the good life, the good society, human nature,

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<sup>66</sup> This socio-cultural project of human dominion (implicating the “mathematization of nature”) also finds cognitive expression in what Heidegger (1966) calls “calculative thought” or what critical theorists have termed “instrumental” or “technological” rationality (Marcuse 1964).

and so on. These assumptions include notions of individual freedom from material necessity and tradition; notions of social status as metrics of success in a Darwinian world of winners and losers competing on their merits for ascendance; the notion of material acquisition as a universal human desire; and a notion of historical progress that includes a fascination with scientific discovery, technological innovation and novelty, and rising standards of living via economic development.

Understood as a meta-narrative, the notion of historical progress is particularly significant as a normative foundation for the mechanistic views of nature emerging in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As Merchant explains, this synthesis of nature and history was largely accomplished by Hobbes. After all, his narrative of human existence begins with atomized (egocentric) individuals in an anarchic and brutal state of nature where social cooperation had to be coerced from without by a governing power (a Leviathan) charged with enforcing law and order. Individuals are thus essentially *independent* of others in society, just as humans are from nature. Only once the intrinsic nature of human existence is tamed and conquered by this higher power can civilization emerge as a force for taming and conquering external nature to the benefit of everyone.<sup>67</sup>

Conceptually, the machine metaphor of nature and the progress narrative of human history both rely on a general philosophy of external relations: the former articulates a metaphysical description of reality emphasizing the distance between self, society, and nature; the latter normatively grounds this metaphysical accent on difference by affirming human history as civilization's liberating ascent from primitive existence in

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<sup>67</sup> As suggested in the previous chapter, incidentally, many contract theorists and game-theoretical approaches to collective action problems arguably reproduce this conceptual infrastructure where egocentric motives for immediate goods compete with collective motives for the general good.

the state of nature. As a meta-narrative of the human relation to nature, the normative trajectory orienting existence identifies the immanent connection to nature defining the past as the negative pole and identifies the disconnection to (or transcendence of) nature defining the future as the positive pole.

Like geometry and metaphysical materialism, the notion of historical progress has ancient roots. This includes Judeo-Christian assumptions of time as linear (e.g., from Creation to the Second Coming), along with Greek and Roman stories about the human relationship to nature. The question in pagan culture was whether civilized human existence represented a regrettable *decline* from an earlier time of communal harmony with nature (primitivism), or an inspiring *ascent* from the cruel hardships of an animalistic past to the technological advantages of civilization today and tomorrow (anti-primitivism). Both positions hold the ontological assumption that defines human civilization as an essential *break* with nature—but they disagree on the normative question of whether this break is good or bad.

The extent to which one is drawn to reading human history as either an unfortunate decline or a fortunate ascent partly reflects one's general attitudes about present society. If one generally feels discontent with existing social conditions and worries for the future (and then expands this sentiment by targeting 'civilization' as the fullest expression of human vice), a reading of historical decline offers a way of comprehensively conceptualizing and confirming this discontent. At its limit, this discontent might find expression in some kind of cultural politics for radical change. Readings of human ascent, on the other hand, are more likely to express an approving

attitude of the status quo, even if contingent reforms are occasionally needed to maintain this ascent.

However, meta-narratives of human history aren't determined by social attitudes or practical concerns alone. Traditional cultural assumptions, as articulated by the conceptions of nature discussed above, also factor in. The root metaphor of nature as an 'organism' is more conducive to primitivism. To the extent that nature is conceived as an organic whole that (rightly) subsumes self and society, any essential break with this original condition is likely to be perceived negatively as a violation. Indeed, as Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas (1935, 11-12) point out in their study of classical primitivism, the concept of nature in the Western tradition has the unique quality of being both descriptive *and* normative in meaning. In addition to functioning as a metaphysical description of reality, nature also signifies the normal and appropriate course of things—as in “acting naturally” (as opposed to the machinations of deceptive, often self-serving behaviors). Hence, as a living organism, nature (*physis*) not only signifies the comprehensive reality that originally engendered and encompassed human existence, but also the inherent *goodness* of this reality. Mechanistic conceptions of nature, by contrast, fit more comfortably with the anti-primitivist position. If nature is indeed a dead machine of moving parts externally governed by universal laws available to human reason (if, for instance, science is “thinking God’s thoughts after him,” as scientists like Kepler and Einstein have said), anti-primitivist assumptions follow to the extent that these laws can be effectively harnessed to serve human ends.

In the early modern era, this dispute over the human relation to nature finds clearest expression in the conflict between Hobbes’s anti-primitivist narrative and

Rousseau's primitivism. As Lovejoy and Boas argue, mainstream Greek culture tended to conceive nature organically as a cosmic whole and weighed more heavily towards the primitivist position accordingly. Modernity, by contrast, has largely mainstreamed the anti-primitivist orientation (despite countercultural tendencies influenced by 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism and 20<sup>th</sup> century environmentalism). This is perhaps particularly evident in the dream of political economists going back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century who conceived capitalism as a linear project to increasingly control and exploit the "free gift" of nature for the sake of unlimited economic growth. And more recently in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anti-primitivist tendencies have found powerful expression in cultural consumerism as a progressive historical vision of the good life in which *freedom from* natural constraints go hand in hand with the *freedom to* humanize the natural world.

The philosophical consistency afforded by the cultural past—as articulated by root metaphors of nature and meta-narratives of human history—enable people in the present to make comprehensive sense of the world and their lives in it moving forward. At the lifeworld level, however, the cultural past isn't merely inherited or passively assumed. Coming full circle, it has to be noted that the social conditions motivating this cultural labor in practice influence *which* metaphors and narratives appear more compelling (and, more rarely, motivate alternative foundations in the process of inaugurating historical epochs). As class power started shifting in the early stages of the modern era from the Aristocrats of the feudal order to the bourgeoisie, the root metaphor of nature as a machine and the meta-narrative of historical progress fit nicely with the socio-economic developments supporting the latter's emergence as a ruling power.

To what extent, however, are the general mass of people *also* implicated in this historical project? After all, most people have little to no control over the scientific-technological-economic means of production situating the capitalist class and attracting them to a mechanistic view of human dominion over nature accordingly. So what motivates *their* identification with the metaphors and narratives that directly serve the ruling class they don't belong to (and, indeed, is exploited by)? Socio-economically speaking, to begin with, people have become increasingly invested in this project since the Industrial Revolution as workers whose paychecks depend on realizing this project in practice. Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, moreover, they have also become increasingly invested *culturally* as consumers.

There are structural and historical reasons for this. Capitalism must continuously expand production in order to avoid depressions and recessions. But once productive levels solve the “problem of scarcity” by comfortably meeting material needs for food, clothing, housing, etc., the threat of “over-production” becomes a serious concern for the capitalist class. If consumer demand plateaus while production continues to grow, markets will flood and crash. Hence, once production levels achieve comfortable levels for the many, “demand” has to be artificially created *beyond* the material needs already met, and this is accomplished by fostering a culture of consumerism. Consumer demand, the most unpredictable and volatile element in the production chain, can only keep up with an ever-expanding supply of goods once consumption becomes meaningful and desirable for its own sake. The magic of purchase involves what Marx calls commodity fetishism in which goods take on lives of their own, but consumerism amounts to a way of life—and ultimately the meaning of life—in a more comprehensive sense.

In the process of what we might call economic enculturation, the ability of advertisers and marketers to culturally integrate the public as consumers to the socio-economic demands for productive growth gets easier over time. Early success, however, required a public *open* to this kind of messaging despite cultural traditions from the preindustrial past (like otherworldly religious sensibilities and virtues like thriftiness and frugality) at odds with the emerging demands for consumerism. Yet, by the 1920s, the need to make sense of life more coherently in the wake of what Karl Polanyi called the “great transformation” to a market society had become palpable. In my view, the truly dramatic (and traumatic) industrialization of life in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century arguably prompted an existential crisis of lifeworld identity that advertisers and marketers could exploit to eventually solidify the socio-cultural cohesion required at this time (Leach 1993; Marchand 1985). Indeed, as I argue below, to the extent that lifeworld identity today generally embodies the successes of this effort to intertwine social and cultural existence for the industrial age, the existential crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the face of climate change is largely a consequence of this accomplishment roughly a century ago.

As everyday life transformed under industrialization, uneasy discontinuities emerged between social and cultural existence. For example, the economic conditions governing practical existence under industrialization involved a rapid transition from, let’s say, being self-sufficient farmers living close to the land and others in religious rural communities to becoming a wage-earning factory workers and urban dweller living under impersonal conditions. Hence, the traditional norms, values, and sensibilities that people relied on for generations to make sense of the world and their (rural and communal) lives

in it found little traction in industrial society. There was an essential break at the lifeworld level, we could say, between *who* one is in life and *what* one does in the world.

Again, this socio-cultural break in (collective) identity must have left an existential vacuum of meaning that industries could step in to fill for their own purposes. Exploiting anxieties about what life holds in this brave new world, advertisers and marketers were able to shift cultural identity in a direction that fit more comfortably with their social existence.<sup>68</sup> By complimenting a social existence marked by mass production with a culture of mass consumption, these meaning brokers could bring familiarity to an alienating world or meaning to meaningless world. Hence, the implicit promise of healing socio-cultural identity and alleviating anxiety, I suggest, substantially opened the general public to adopting the capitalist project of socio-ecological dominion.

If this general reading of history is on the right track, the existential crisis of socio-cultural identity felt in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was key to solving the feared “crisis of distribution” threatening capitalism as an increasingly dominant force. There was, to borrow Weber’s term, an “elective affinity” between the existential needs of the alienated masses (for socio-cultural meaning) and the economic needs of the ruling class (for keeping consumption levels apace with productive growth). In this historical context, then, there’s reason to expect an exploitable germ of public openness to culturally adopting the same metaphors and narratives assumed by captains of industry and others

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<sup>68</sup> Growing public trust in *science* was important here as well (Marchand 1985), which would come back to haunt their descendants as climate scientists try to convince them of the consequences of their consumerism.

whose identity was already firmly invested in the “market society” establishing their positions of power.<sup>69</sup>

Living under the weight of climate change a century later, the solution to existence in the industrial age has itself become a problem. That is, the existential crisis of socio-cultural identity “solved” by the creation of a work-force living to consume has led to an entirely new existential crisis. Following the Industrial Revolution, the existential conflict was between practical industrial existence lived in the present and the cultural sensibilities and virtues inherited from the pre-industrial past. The conflict looming today, by contrast, is between the socio-cultural identity that emerged from this experience and the unforeseen but dramatic *consequences* of this way of being. In other words, the conflict today isn’t just between social and cultural existence, but between history and nature. Indeed, the difference between the existential crises in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is critical. It’s one thing to address a socio-cultural *disjuncture* by reforming cultural institutions to fit more consistently with existing social institutions, or vice-versa. But once social and cultural institutions achieve coherence and stability by finding mutual confirmation in daily life, it’s another thing to address basic conflicts between lifeworld identity as a socio-cultural whole and the material world beyond it.

One might object here by pointing out that lifeworld existence itself is inherently open to the material world beyond it, and therefore open to change in response to changing material conditions. The social and cultural institutions finding comprehension at the background level of lifeworld existence inform collective relations to non-human

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<sup>69</sup> It was in this context in the 1920s, incidentally, that Marxists like Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci noticed this cultural assimilation to capitalism, prompting them to focus on reification, ideology, and class consciousness.

nature, but certainly don't determine them. So there's no reason to believe that socio-cultural institutions at this background level cannot be refigured in response to unforeseen contingencies and problems like climate change to foster fundamentally new—more sustainable—relations to nature. In fact, one could easily argue that human survival over evolutionary time has *depended* on this lifeworld openness or attunement to the ecological dynamics of material nature beyond the deepest cultural assumptions and social routines that define a given people. This must have been especially true during the long stretch of human evolution before the climate stabilized enough in Holocene to make the agricultural revolution (and thus civilization) possible. Existing in the relatively unstable climate in which the great expanse of human evolution occurred must have required the kind of fluid socio-cultural openness to non-human nature that finds clearest expression today in indigenous lifeworlds.<sup>70</sup> From this general perspective, then, it would seem that there is no reason to assume that socio-cultural institutions today cannot be fundamentally refigured in response to news about climate change revealing conflicts between lifeworld existence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the natural world beyond it.

In response to this objection, it should first be noted that such a refiguring of lifeworld existence takes (historical) time, and the short timeline physically imposed by climate change isn't accommodating. Furthermore, perhaps the problems instigating transformations on this scale are more palpably felt and easier to grasp in their totality than the climate problem. But recalling the decades of denial and inaction previously discussed, the deeper issue concerns the inherent *resistance* to change in the face of

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<sup>70</sup> See the final section of chapter five entitled "A Total Intention for Dialogical Partnership" for a brief discussion of indigenous lifeworlds from a Native American perspective.

nature built right into in the socio-cultural institutions defining the modern lifeworld responsible for the climate change. The problem, in other words, is that the matrix of institutions solidifying the hegemonic structures of lifeworld identity in the post-industrial era largely find their background coherence in the project of human dominion *over* nature—whether this finds social expression in one’s practical routines and interests as an employee or cultural expression in one’s ambitions to realize the good life as a consumer. So, although lifeworld existence is indeed open to the material world beyond it and thus capable of socio-cultural change in response to material problems, the socio-cultural background of lifeworld identity distinctive to industrial existence seems to work against this basic capacity. For those who tacitly *live*—not just “believe in”—the project of scientifically, technologically, and economically controlling nature for the sake of human progress or development, what alternative relations to nature are even conceivable aside from “going back to the cave” or the brutal state of nature envisioned by Hobbes?

Unlike the existential crisis of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, therefore, in which existing social motives could be harnessed to invite cultural reform (or, conversely, when existing cultural motives are harnessed to create space for social reform), with climate change there’s an extent to which social and cultural motives work synergistically to resist ethically reflecting on the deeper implications of climate change. It is in this sense, I suggest, that the most profound barrier to collective action is existential. As an existential expression of climate denial, this intersubjective resistance manifests itself as a collective effort to protect lifeworld identity.

Finally, let us consider another angle on the unique character of this particular existential crisis—as expressed in McKibben’s point that action against climate change is

like action against ourselves—by comparing it to the postwar existentialists that popularized this term. Sartre and Camus, for example, largely spoke to French anxieties following Nazi occupation when traditional certainties and the future were being occupied by a foreign ideology and hostile power (in addition to other anxieties about alienation and the “death of God,” etc.). But in contrast to the existential philosophers of absurdity that invite their readers to find meaning in a world that is essentially indifferent to their lives, Lifton (2017, 2) points out that “the subject of global warming is absurd in a newly bizarre way.”

It’s ultimate absurdity is this: by merely continuing with our present practices and routines, we human beings will increasingly harm our own habitat, the portion of nature we require to survive, and ultimately destroy our own civilization. We needn’t start a war or make use of nuclear weapons. We needn’t do anything—other than what we are already doing—to endanger the future of our species. (Ibid, 2-3)

The absurdity unique to the climate situation today, in other words, is intrinsic to the basic “meaning of life” held intact by the socio-cultural identity of industrial existence threatening the global future of life. Hence, absurdity comes, not from a *forced* break in the socio-cultural continuity of life by a foreign agent, but from the need to voluntarily impose this alienating break on “ourselves.” Again, I suggest, this is the crux of the existential problem. And I maintain that it constitutes a powerful affective barrier to collective action in relation to which other barriers can be more comprehensively understood and addressed.

In this chapter so far, I have endeavored to outline an ideal type of lifeworld hegemony that brings out the socio-cultural structures in the background of industrial existence most sharply called into question by the ethical and ontological implications of systemic climate change. And yet, despite the tremendous historical weight of the

existential problem articulated above, it is nevertheless evident that some communities *do* seem genuinely empowered to take responsibility for this systemic problem. As many ethically-motivated grassroots climate movements for systemic change attest, there appear to be ways of productively working through climate anxieties without succumbing to denial. How might we understand these promising beacons of hope from an existentialist perspective? Returning to Heidegger for perspective, I argue that overcoming the ethical quandary of denial requires pathways for cultivating a deep acceptance of anxieties that would otherwise shut down ethical reflection and dialogue unconsciously, and effectively process these anxieties accordingly.

### ***Taking Responsibility for the Climate Situation***

To the extent that the socio-cultural implications of systemic climate change roundly conflict with the dominant background structures of lifeworld identity, this issue is generally received as a threat to ontological security. In particular, the anxieties signaling this amorphous threat can quickly shut down ethical reflection before it begins. Nevertheless, a variety of grassroots climate movements over the past decade or so present impressive examples of ethical motivation for bottom-up change in response to the climate problem. These experiments in collective action include Transition Towns, Carbon Reduction Action Groups (CRAGs), Climate Action Groups (CAGs), Climate Camps, and the general plethora of direct action groups around the globe that Naomi Klein collectively refers to as “Blockadia.” Fortunately, these movements have attracted academic attention, including qualitative research that is arguably relevant to the existential problem. In her study of CAGs, for example, Jenifer Kent (2016, 98) argues

that people “are able to take voluntary action...because CAGs possess particular characteristics and are able to surmount the constraints that reinforce the status quo.” Very much the same is said of the climate camp activists studied by Rosewarne, *et al.* Indeed, of all the grassroots climate movements that have received academic attention, the latter appears to be among the most dedicated to systemic change. Activists were intent on developing a comprehensive conception of the climate issue focused on root causes as opposed to accumulating pragmatic gains. Given the overwhelming complexities and magnitude of climate change, together with the dearth of socio-cultural institutions to facilitate collective actions commensurate with this problem, the challenges of overcoming systemic barriers to action were certainly daunting, and the tangible success of the movement was limited by its short duration (roughly from 2007 to 2010). Even so, as Rosewarne, *et al.* detail, the movement remained problem-driven to a surprising degree during this time. The transition towns movement, moreover, offer practical models of climate responsibility in everyday life (Brook 2009). The city of Freiburg, where Heidegger taught, is a prominent example of a transition town in practice, but hundreds of others exist worldwide.

Apparently, therefore, some communities have indeed learned to work through the disturbing implications of climate change to confront and, to some extent at least, overcome the existential problem. But how, from an existential perspective, did the activists building and driving these relatively problem-driven movements get to this point of action in the first place? More to the point, what are the conditions of possibility that enable some communities to productively confront the systemic implications of climate change threatening ontological insecurity? Ultimately, we must first strive for a better

understand what originally opens the door to ethical and political motivation in the first instance.

For Heidegger, there are two basic ways of dealing with anxiety. The first can be described as “reactive” and the second as “responsive.”<sup>71</sup> The reactive approach shows itself as a willful clinging to the socio-cultural norms and sensibilities that brought lifeworld/ontological security in the past. This defensive reaction can be defined by its intention to keep one’s world intact by any means available. Importantly, we could add that the motivation to react is, as previously claimed, partly determined by systemic privilege—i.e., by the extent to which one identifies with the structures of institutionalized power supporting them being challenged by the socio-cultural implications of climate change (*a la* System-Justification Theory and Social Dominance Orientation). The means by which this protective reaction takes place, moreover, largely depends on the structural makeup of the community in question. For instance, traditions that encourage groups to put their faith in some external power like God, the government, the free market, or Gaia to work out humanities biggest problems could predispose people to relinquish—rather than take—responsibility (compared to, let’s say, humanist traditions that promote self-efficacy).<sup>72</sup> For those that, for whatever reason, lack the socio-cultural traction needed to effectively confront a problem like climate change in those decisive moments of first encounter, retreating to traditional assumptions or

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<sup>71</sup> I should note here that the discussion that follows is predominantly inspired by my personal (and very general) reading of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, but certainly isn’t intended as a scholarly reflection of his work. Many of the terms I employ in this discussion, for instance, beginning with like “response” and “reaction,” aren’t his own.

<sup>72</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, incidentally, identify this tendency as “bad faith” and give it a prominent place in their early versions of existentialism as a counterpoint to “authentic responsibility.”

sticking closely to the practical routines regulating daily affairs allows one to safely abstract this issue from the moral fabric of everyday life. This, as Norgaard shows, is a common means of offloading ethical responsibility to preserve one's essential hold on the world and keep oneself from falling apart.

But what do communities do with their anxiety if they don't have an "external source" to reliably cling to? For example, what happens to those who identify with communities that accept the science of climate change and yet distrust big corporations and big government to solve this problem? Or how might a community cope if they're already suspicious of the mechanistic logic of technological optimism defining mainstream climate discourses and the spirit of pragmatic compromise that usually accompanies it? Indeed, consider the influence of romantic conceptions of organic nature and primitivism existing today in various counter-cultural sensibilities. Philosophically, this influence finds clear expression in certain strains of radical ecology, but it also enjoys much wider appeal in popular culture (as evidenced most conspicuously, perhaps, in the top-grossing film *Avatar*<sup>73</sup>). All things considered, some people are clearly less predisposed than others to fully identify with the project of human dominion over nature that is hegemonic in the societies they live in. In communities that, to some extent,

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<sup>73</sup> Although this film reflects romantic cultural influences, these influences are by no means unproblematic. A careful treatment of the legacy of romanticism in the context of confronting contemporary problems would have to conclude with mixed feelings. Although this tradition compels many white middle-class people today (perhaps suffering from the spiritual bankruptcy of affluenza) to cultivate a deeper respect for nature and indigenous peoples, hegemonic assumptions about human nature and particularly human agency remain, not just unquestioned but reinforced with renewed moral sanction. Indigenous philosopher Kyle P. Whyte writes: "Avatar is a powerful story of environmental injustice against the Na'vi people, who live under the dystopia of alien invasion from a more powerful military force. Yet the protagonist who emerges is an alien, non-Na'vi white male who is able to pass for Na'vi and have a sexual relationship with a Na'vi gendered female character who becomes defined in terms of this romantic relationship" (Whyte 2018, 231). Hence, otherwise laudatory films like this invite viewers to identify with the traditional paradigm of human/historical agency (e.g., white male), and in so doing reduce the agency of indigenous people to this paradigm.

identify with lifeworld assumptions like these, the fundamentalisms that enable others to keep anxiety at bay may not be compelling options.

In any case, should people find themselves without recourse to the easy comfort of traditional lifeworld norms and sensibilities, they have the opportunity to prepare for the second way of dealing with anxiety—what Heidegger calls the “authentic” response. Once intuition tells us that the background assumptions we counted on in the past ultimately fail to serve us moving forward, the personal and collective search for a new identity begins with the hope that more secure ways of being in the world can be productively harnessed.

Although ‘authenticity’ as an ethical concept has rightly come under fire, it is nevertheless instructive in this context.<sup>74</sup> For Heidegger, authenticity requires one to step back from the comforting world of socio-cultural norms and habituated routines in order to see them for what they are—as expressing just one way of life among possible others. Once communities cultivate the ability to openly *accept* anxiety, rather than engage in strategies of denial to contain it, people can experience an empowering liberation from fear that allows them to, once again, take a stand in life. This time, however, they address a world that they have, in a sense, owned up to and earned with the insight that meaning is created rather than given. As previously invisible background assumptions become

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<sup>74</sup>The dominant concern, particularly from Marxist critics (including some contemporaries against the early Sartre), is that philosophies of authenticity depoliticize ethics by focusing inwardly on what is true for the individual. Hence, one could feel normatively grounded and justified as an “authentic capitalist” or an “authentic Nazi.” It can be noted, moreover, particularly in the American context, that the “culture of narcissism” diagnosed by psychoanalyst Christopher Lasch (1979), arguably traces back to the 1960s and ‘70s when Sartrean existentialism was being eagerly consumed. Although I am in general agreement with these concerns, my own use of ‘authenticity’ is (as I explain below) intended to be ethical *and* political in significance—and thus, not just an expression of subjective reflection but more importantly an avenue of *intersubjective* dialogue and action (particularly in the process of collectively managing anxieties felt in common). For a brief overview of critiques of authenticity, see “Authenticity” (Varga and Guignon, 2017).

foregrounded, communities can begin to recognize socio-cultural background structures for what they are: as socio-cultural guidelines with the weight of history and nothing more. Although it takes vigilance, confronting anxiety by accepting it and working through it with others might enable one to resist falling into the gravitational pull of mainstream everydayness promising security and relief.

Perhaps a clear example of this kind of authenticity at work can be found in the climate activism of Tim DeChristopher (n.d.). He was sentenced to two years in prison after disrupting an oil and gas lease auction by falsely bidding on 116 parcels of public land. But what is significant here is the existential crisis that brought DeChristopher to this decisive moment of action in the first place. In an interview with Terry Tempest Williams, he speaks of an anxious period of mourning for the future after talking at length with one of the lead authors of the fourth IPCC report. It's worth quoting at length.

**TIM:** I said [to the scientist]: “So, what am I missing? It seems like you guys are saying there’s no way we can make it.” And she said, “You’re not missing anything. There are things we could have done in the ’80s, there are some things we could have done in the ’90s—but it’s probably too late to avoid any of the worst-case scenarios that we’re talking about.” And she literally put her hand on my shoulder and said, “I’m sorry my generation failed yours.” That was shattering to me.

**TERRY:** When was this?

**TIM:** This was in March of 2008. And I said, “You just gave a speech to four hundred people and you didn’t say anything like that. Why aren’t you telling people this?” And she said, “Oh, I don’t want to scare people into paralysis. I feel like if I told people the truth, people would just give up.”...But with me, it did the exact opposite. Once I realized that there was no hope in any sort of normal future, there’s no hope for me to have anything my parents or grandparents would have considered a normal future—of a career and a retirement and all that stuff—I realized that I have absolutely nothing to lose by fighting back. Because it was all going to be lost anyway.

**TERRY:** So, in other words, at that moment, it was like, “I have no expectations.”

**TIM:** Yeah. And it did push me into this deep period of despair.

**TERRY:** And what did you do with it?

**TIM:** Nothing. I was rather paralyzed, and it really felt like a period of mourning. I really felt like I was grieving my own future, and grieving the futures of everyone I care about.

**TERRY:** Did you talk to your friends about this?

**TIM:** Yeah, I had friends who were coming to similar conclusions. And I was able to kind of work through it, and get to a point of action. But I think it's that period of grieving that's missing from the climate movement.

**TERRY:** I would say the environmental movement.

**TIM:** Yeah. That denies the severity of the situation, because that grieving process is really hard. I struggle with pushing people into that period of grieving. I mean, I find myself pulling back. I see people who still have that kind of buoyancy and hopefulness. And I don't want to shatter that, you know?

**TERRY:** But I think that what no one tells you is, if you go into that dark place, you do come out the other side, you know? If you can go into that darkest place, you can emerge with a sense of empathy and empowerment. (DeChristopher n.d.)

As DeChristopher's story suggests, the difference between reacting to ontological insecurity and authentically responding to it is the difference between covering up anxiety (denial) and accepting it as a signal that there is indeed a problem that we must take responsibility for. Just as pain teaches us what is physically harmful in the world, anxiety should teach us what is existentially harmful about our relationship to it. Should a community find itself with some meaningful purchase on the normative implications of climate change, it probably has a better chance of truly responding to anxiety than a community whose lifeworld is underprepared to make sense of this problem.

We should be clear, however, that the authentic response doesn't involve the 'authentic' freedom of Jean-Paul Sartre's rather individualist brand of existentialism. Cultivating an authentic stance requires collective projects of meaning-making just as much as the forms of denial analyzed by Norgaard do. On Hubert Dreyfus's reading,

moreover, the moment of transformation from the anxious cover-up of denial to the resolve of authenticity does not involve a willful choice but happens to one as if by a gestalt switch. Suddenly, new possibilities open up as structures of meaning instituted in the past (for the sake of realizing a certain future) lose their invisible grip.

[One] must arrive at a way of dealing with things and people that incorporates the insights gained in anxiety that no possibilities [for us] have *intrinsic* meaning...yet makes that insight the basis for an active life. Precisely because [one] is clear that [one] can have no final meaning or settled identity, [one] is clear-sighted about what is actually possible. (Dreyfus 1991, 320)

The existential clarity articulated here appears to parallel DeChristopher's emergence from shattered expectations. Learning to be at home in a world we have owned up to and earned, we become secure and hence receptive in the face of possibility, rather than willful in the face of alienation. Depending on the extent to which one identifies with the privileging institutions challenged by the deeper implications of climate change, the authentic response to climate anxiety may be critical to addressing the existential problem of motivating ethical reflection and action. In the context of the collective action problem, learning to bring climate anxiety to consciousness with others and work through the existential barriers to genuine ethical concern is arguably essential to taking responsibility for the climate problem in Cuomo's sense.

If this reading of Heidegger captures something basic to human experience, the authentic response to climate anxiety should enable people to openly respond to the unique situation for what it is—as in the historically unique situation we call climate change. In other words, accepting and working through climate anxiety is essential to cultivating the ethical (and political) motivation to becoming problem-driven. There is an extent to which this requires character virtues like courage and integrity, in addition to a

significant measure of self-efficacy, care, community support, and so on. To be more precise with my language, however, the authentic response isn't exactly responding to the anxiety itself. That is, the response isn't directed inwardly to manage the anxiety or ward off denial, but rather to the problematic situation sourcing this anxiety. Unlike the reaction, the response expresses a kind of answer to a problem that, to some extent, transcends it in orientation. Genuine answers neither misunderstand nor merely repeat the question. They intentionally *take up* the question and bring themselves to it by volunteering a response that is true to the situation.

In this respect, it is not enough to invite people to courageously confront climate anxiety for the sake of becoming steadfastly problem-driven (as if out of duty or expectation), even if this is sometimes lauded as morally principled. Taking responsibility implies an ability to respond, and one cannot truly respond to questions with intention unless the possibility of an answer glimmers on the horizon—however vague or indeterminate that glimmer may be at first. Likewise, one cannot authentically respond to problems without a horizon of possible solutions. Ultimately, therefore, more than ethical motivation is needed to confront and respond to climate anxiety—and thus overcome the existential problem. Here we touch on some of the basic limits of chapters two and three where the collective action problem centers on what I have called the ethical quandary of denial. In addition to ethical motivation, responding to the climate problem also demands a kind of solution-driven political motivation—a positive vision of the future that draws the way forward. The essential quandary at this stage, then, centers on the challenges of making an existential transitioning from ethics to politics.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter transitions from a macro-level structural analysis of the ethical quandary of climate denial to lifeworld approach. In chapter two, I suggest that a problem-driven response encounters three structural barriers to ethical motivation but argued that the structural approaches under review weren't philosophically equipped to confront the problem of overcoming these barriers in the process of taking responsibility. Offering an existential-phenomenological reading of Norgaard's social psychology of climate denial, this chapter reconceives the political, cultural, and social barriers to climate response as intertwining vectors of lifeworld identity. That is, I consider how the institutionalized forms of power, common sense norms, and practical behaviors *embodied in the intersubjective background of experience* orient one's initial encounter with the climate issue. To the extent that the deeper implications of this systemic problem shake the socio-cultural foundations of lifeworld identity/existence hegemonic in the industrialized world, this issue risks being received as an existential threat that shuts down ethical reflection and dialogue. In its most insidious forms, then, the ethical quandary of climate denial speaks to a larger issue that I call the existential problem.

Importantly, however, the existential problem is by no means a monolithic phenomenon precisely because lifeworld identity is not universal to all people. This is one reason that I analytically distinguished the structural dimensions of climate response in chapter two. There are significant differences in the way various groups and the individuals within them are politically, culturally, and socially situated in relation to the climate problem that inform different perceptions of it. Indeed, one could imagine a number of different political, cultural, and social configurations orienting one's general

response to this issue.<sup>75</sup> If grassroots movements for systemic change hope to maximize their appeal to recruit potential activists and garner public support, a sensitivity to the ways in which these different factors inform ethical motivation is crucial. More to the point, if the sweeping socio-cultural implications of this systemic problem are in fact deep enough to call some of the most basic foundations of lifeworld identity into question, it's quite possible that ethical responsibility on a sufficient scale would require a comprehensive realignment of political, cultural, and social motives.

My thesis in this regard is that alternative configurations of lifeworld identity are needed to genuinely confront and work through the existential problem. I take up this challenge in the final chapter where I advance a critical phenomenology of climate response inspired by comprehensive visions of social and socio-ecological relations modeled on “dialogical partnership.” But in order to get a better grasp of what such an identity (or identities) would be an alternative *to*, an ideal type of the lifeworld identity hegemonic in the industrialized world most responsible for climate change is needed to serve as a baseline contrast. With this in mind, I offered a socio-cultural genealogy of nature and the human relationship to it in this chapter that, in my view, is threatened most powerfully by the systemic implications of climate change. Turning to Husserl not only

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<sup>75</sup> Conceivably, for example, some climate pragmatists might—thanks to upbringing, education, etc.—be *culturally* situated to take in the science and work through the ethical implications of the climate situation in the process of taking responsibility for this systemic problem. But to the extent that they are *socially* and *politically* situated as professionals who, let's say, depend on corporate or state access or financial support to achieve “progress” (and “success” in their careers), the practical motives orienting their perceptions and responses to this issue are likely to carry significant weight. Indeed, existential needs for socio-cultural integrity may lead many in this situation to slowly but surely internalize the mechanistic logic of technocratic progress as the only “realistic” response to climate change—something that, before being anchored to their careers, might have been unpalatable to them in their “youthful idealism” when cultural expressions of reflection and dialogue were affordable. On the other hand, we can imagine people who do not find themselves situated by any socio-political demands for cultural conformity but, thanks to religious or ideological upbringing, are already predisposed to perceiving climate change in ways that are generally compatible with the status quo.

allows me to introduce the lifeworld concept that he philosophically pioneered, but also enabled me to disclose the modern (“mathematized”) conception of objective ‘nature’ sedimented in the background of lifeworld identity that is central to the existential problem. Beyond its traditional significance to the scientific project (i.e., of disclosing the material world objectively), this complex conception of nature orients socio-cultural existence much more broadly by articulating a domineering relation to this world, human and nonhuman alike. Hence, to the extent that one’s actual lifeworld identity embodies this ontological-historical project of dominion over a natural world that has been mathematized, mechanized, and objectified for the sake of human progress, any honest or unguarded confrontation with the systemic implications of climate change runs the terrible risk of opening the floodgates of existential anxiety. From this perspective, climate denial is an anticipatory move that is intended to protect the background structures of lifeworld identity from unraveling.

Although the threat of climate anxiety isn’t universally felt, finding relatively safe pathways across the political, cultural, and social dimensions of the existential problem situating different people to the otherwise common threat of climate change is essential to opening up reflection, dialogue, and ultimately action. Indeed, taking cues from Heidegger’s conception of authenticity, I suggest that transitioning from climate denial to climate responsibility begins with an ability to courageously *accept*—rather than avoid or manage—the existential anxieties portending this lifeworld confrontation. For those in a position to productively confront and work through the anxieties motivating denial, possibilities emerge to transition from a “reactive” posture of myopic self-defense to a “responsive” relation to the climate problem. It is precisely from this relatively open

stance of ethical responsibility that the ‘external’ implications of this systemic problem can be actively taken up and ‘internalized’—and vice-versa.

In the final analysis, however, being “open” to “internalizing” the ethical implications of the climate problem is not enough. As soon as—and actually well before—one takes that crucial step towards ethical responsibility in the face of systemic climate change, more practical questions about next steps immediately begin to loom. What, exactly, follows industrial modernity? How could we possibly get there? A truly authentic response to the climate problem cannot avoid these daunting, seemingly unrealistic, questions for long in good faith. Although something like an existential “leap of faith” or “radical hope” (Thompson 2010) is needed in the face of a deeply uncertain future, one doesn’t jump without secure footing—and one doesn’t jump blindly in any case. In addition to ethical attunement, confronting an existential threat like climate change also requires direction, orientation, meaningful purpose—or, in a word, *intentionality*. If fear and anxiety can sometimes motivate us to openly listen and see with care, without a voice prepared to actively respond with intention they are more likely to motivate closed eyes and ears. Hence, as I discuss in the final two chapters, if working through anxiety is essential to taking ethical responsibility for the climate situation, this needs to be complimented by a political vision of hope and wonder to answer—and thus transcend—the problem moving forward. Somehow, ethical motives for becoming steadfastly problem-driven must work effectively with truly solution-driven political motives to transcend the daunting givens of the problem moving forward. Here, of course, we don’t speak of the technocratic and pragmatic “solutions” discussed in chapter two that are politically oriented to protect business-as-usual and existing power

structures. The truly solution-driven politics we speak of, rather, must be deeply responsive to the systemic nature of the climate problem for what it is.

Yet, this essential task is more difficult than it first appears, involving a set of challenges intertwined with (but distinct from) those orbiting the ethical quandary of climate denial. From a lifeworld perspective, one might easily feel something like an unbridgeable abyss between a problem-driven ethics of climate responsibility and a solution-driven politics of climate action moving forward.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, considerable caution is needed to effectively navigate this existential abyss—between problem and solution, question and answer, ethics and politics—if one is to avoid getting stuck on either side. Given the felt needs for lifeworld integrity, socio-cultural continuity, theoretical consistency, etc., the temptation is strong to either stand with ethical conviction on the solid ground of climate science or to move more fluidly through the currents of climate politics where things can get done and progress made. But anxiety without hope invites denial from the start, and so does hope without anxiety in the end. If anxiety without hope for the future encourages people to spit out an indigestible problem to prevent an upset stomach, hope without anxiety invites one to conveniently sugar-coat the problem to make it palatable.

A critical phenomenology of climate response sensitive to the existential problem, I submit, can help activists creatively and effectively mediate this existential abyss between problem-driven ethical responsibility and solution-driven political action in order to deepen and grow the movement. Turning from what I have called the ethical

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<sup>76</sup> If not denied, the extent to which this “abyss” is felt arguably hinges on the extent to which one identifies with the socio-cultural project of world dominion previously outlined.

quandary of denial to the political quandary of transition ultimately takes us from Husserl and Heidegger to the most politically-oriented of the major phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty. In the next chapter, however, I examine debates in the climate literature that exemplify the existential abyss between problem-driven and solution-driven approaches to systemic climate change.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ABYSS BETWEEN ETHICAL AND POLITICAL

#### MOTIVES FOR CLIMATE RESPONSE:

##### HARD MEDICINE REALISM VS. POSITIVE VISION CULTURALISM

###### *Introduction*

Collective motivation requires creating enough political, cultural, and social distance from the lifeworld identity hegemonic in the industrialized world to authentically process the ethical—and indeed ontological—implications of systemic climate change. The chances of success here, however, are not uniformly distributed. They significantly depend on the extent to which people traditionally identify with the modern industrial order in the socio-cultural background of everyday existence (as well as personal coping skills, supporting environment, and many other contingencies that aren't reducible to this lifeworld background). Communication strategies must therefore be as sensitive as possible to the vectors of lifeworld existence that situate different people to the climate problem in complex ways.

Yet, even for those who find themselves in a relatively good position to honestly confront the ethical implications of systemic climate change, the challenges of overcoming the existential problem cannot rest with a capacity to authentically take in these implications. The task of internalizing the implications of climate change—focusing chapters two and three—culminates in the imperative to cultivate lifeworld alternatives to domineering relations to nature (and others) to deal with the anxieties that come with this kind of authentic responsibility. Yet, in addition to finding lifeworld inroads to the full implications of the climate problem, one must also 'externalize' or

translate these implications in the form of a socio-cultural project.<sup>77</sup> The task at hand here, in other words, is to translate the actual “problem” into viable “solutions” that are meaningful enough to truly *respond* to the climate situation we find ourselves in today. At this point, our attention turns from the first to the second moment of the existential problem—that is, from the ethical quandary of climate denial framing chapters two and three to the political quandary of climate transition focusing this chapter and the next.

The distinction drawn above between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ is helpful in some ways (and will be revisited in the next chapter). But not unlike the old philosophical standbys of ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ the metaphysical baggage undergirding these terms leads one to exaggerate the sharpness of this distinction. This is why, in the final section of the previous chapter, I introduce the dialogical language of “response” as, for instance, a phenomenological relation between “question” and “answer.”<sup>78</sup> From this perspective, we don’t just speak of internalizing and externalizing the implications of climate change but of *responding* to these implications with all of the philosophical richness implied by this phenomenon. In essence, the authentic response is neither completely open nor predetermined, it is neither intrinsically nor extrinsically motivated, and in movement it cannot be reduced to an introjection or a projection. Indeed, this phenomenon intertwines many of the categorical distinctions structuring Western thought with ties to subjective interiority and objective exteriority, such as mind and body, activity and passivity, self

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<sup>77</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s term “total intention,” discussed in the next chapter, speaks to what I refer to here as a socio-cultural project.

<sup>78</sup> In addition to capturing the political quandary of transition more effectively, this shift in metaphor affords direct inroads to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as a unique contribution to the complex challenges of climate response driving the dissertation.

and other, and human and nature. The response is, as Merleau-Ponty would say, lived in ambiguity.<sup>79</sup>

If we revisit the task of climate response from this perspective, we can say that “taking responsibility” requires more than an ability to openly and honestly ask ethically-motivated questions about the true nature of the climate problem. A purely problem-driven stance easily leads to a pitfall of half-truths, as when one assumes that right answers naturally follow from asking the right questions or that the right solution to a problem directly reflects one’s grasp of that problem. From a phenomenological perspective, it is evident that reflection and dialogue on the question of what climate change is and what it ultimately entails occurs under a preconceptual horizon of possible “answers.” Answers don’t simply follow questions in linear fashion, and the same is true with problems and solutions. Weighty existential questions without any perceivable answers on the horizon, for instance, could threaten to break essential ties to the world and the future with intolerable consequences.<sup>80</sup> So one can certainly *react* to questions

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<sup>79</sup> Indeed, drawing on Merleau-Ponty in the next chapter, I submit that grasping motivation as a relation of response affords philosophical entry to the “paradoxical logic” of climate inaction discussed in chapter one.

<sup>80</sup> Other possibilities exist. At the limit, questions with no hint of an answer whatsoever would be unintelligible as questions to begin with, just as calculus problems are not grasped as “problems” to a three-year-old. There is a sense in which toddlers are, let us say, *too* “open-minded” to grasp such problems for what they are because they do yet possess the cognitive traction to guide recognition from the outset. Another possibility is that questions without answers are, if not unintelligible, still perceived as *meaningless* (absurd or irrelevant) either because they are—from a certain perspective—impossible to answer or because they have already been answered. Scientific materialists might grasp theological problems like theodicy but dismiss their significance as real/valid problems because they are impossible to answer from their perspective. Orthodox theologians, on the other hand, might dismiss the validity of scientific problems like cosmogenesis or biogenesis, not because they are unanswerable but because from a their perspective they have *already* been answered. Now with respect to implicatory climate denial, in contrast to these other possibilities, it may be that the climate problem is indeed intelligible and its meaning/significance recognizable at a background level, but it is not consciously *acknowledged* as a problem because of what the answers imply. Ironically, then, if answering the climate problem for what it is leads one by implication to question their way of being in the world without any truly meaningful alternatives, climate change isn’t acknowledged as a problem of concern precisely because it *is* intelligible and recognized as significant—and yet offers no meaningful response.

perceived as unanswerable by denying the question in the first place, but a genuine response requires intentions *beyond* the original question for expression. The latter, in other words, presupposes a lifeworld orientation or direction of some kind—a way of taking up the question at hand meaningfully and intending an answer that points somewhere or projects one into the future.<sup>81</sup> Hence, collectives must not only learn to further distance themselves from the dominant structures of lifeworld identity that predispose some (more than others) to the existential problem in one form or another. They must also come to identify with the world of future possibilities outlined in the form of visionary ideals *answerable* to the otherwise absurd questions that must now be asked in true response to systemic climate change.<sup>82</sup>

Recalling the opening question of chapter one, “How should we respond to climate change?,” the depth of meaning behind the word “response” comes into view more fully with this second dimension. As I argue more fully in the final chapter, the dialogical language of response treats ‘question’ and ‘answer’ as ontologically distinct but intertwined *motivations* that, in the climate situation, relates problem-driven and

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<sup>81</sup> What’s most important here has less to do with one’s ability to explicitly conceive clear and distinct answers to questions, or solutions to problems, but more to do with the meaningful possibilities afforded by one’s general, socio-cultural way of being in the world moving forward. Indeed, theoretical formulations promising analytic precision and clarity in “response” to this enormously complex and ambiguous problem are, in my view, symptomatic of the political quandary of transition (and perhaps the ethical quandary of denial as well if the systemic nature of the climate problem *as inherently ambiguous* is reduced into manageable sectors of thought to neutralize anxiety). This is why, in this dissertation, I do not pretend to advance determinate answers to what I consider the essentially indeterminate questions of climate response. On the other hand, however, one must take care not to make the opposite mistake by overemphasizing ambiguity over clarity (or contingency over structure, and so on), for this can be disempowering.

<sup>82</sup> The challenges of overcoming the existential problem are particularly steep for those who identify most strongly with the system causing climate change. But even marginalized groups that tend not to identify with a system they generally find oppressive might nevertheless struggle to fully identify with alternatives to it—like a truly post-carbon future that significantly transcends the world of everyday experience and that, to some degree at least, they have been forced by necessity to adapt to. This point is explored further in the next chapter.

solution-driven ways of approaching this issue. I submit, therefore, that a truly viable response to the climate situation requires bringing these distinct motives into a productive relationship (across the multiple vectors of lifeworld identity). Setting the stage in this chapter, however, I argue that ‘question’ and ‘answer,’ ‘problem’ and ‘solution,’ aren’t just distinct but effectively divorced from one another in the face of systemic climate change.

An intuition for this basic disconnect can emerge by juxtaposing what the climate situation *ethically demands* with what is *politically possible* moving forward. If responsibility requires taking an ethical stand, the more political moment of response requires motion. And yet, an unbridged abyss seems to separate the ethical and political grounds of climate response. Responding to the climate situation requires an intersubjective ability to make this seemingly incomprehensible transition from ethics to politics, problem to solution, and back again. But to the extent that one encounters an unbridged abyss separating the ethical and political grounds of climate response, any conscious approach to the climate issue is compelled to “pick a side.” This is largely because, as intentional beings, confronting a situation consistently requires meaningful entry, direction, perspective—or a kind of orienting logic. But absent this essential ability to fluidly mediate, traverse, or bring ethical and political motives into communication in the furthest reaches of lifeworld identity, avoiding paralysis requires standing on one side of the abyss or the other. Should one manage to, let’s say hypothetically, somehow put a foot on both sides at once, this otherwise intentional being would be effectively suspended and neither an ethical stance nor political motion would ultimately come of it.

Stranded on either side, a consistent problem-driven approach to systemic climate change is thus likely predisposed to *react* to solution-driven approaches working on the other side, and vice-versa (not unlike different sects of a common religion or different regions of a common nation). Referring back to the second chapter for a rather clear example of this, it might be safe to suppose that those who are ethically motivated to confront the material gravity and historical implications of climate change as a systemic problem are likely to perceive those focused predominantly on pragmatic political solutions with suspicion (if not derision) as too myopic, safe, or in any case as dramatically out of step with the problem. Some moral zealots might go so far as to accuse them of being hopelessly corrupt “sell-outs” that deserve as much (or *more*) contempt as their meta-emitting corporate and state partners. Likewise, in reverse, climate activists in the thick of political involvement struggling for measurable progress might easily perceive those issuing dire warnings or raging against capitalism as “detached” and “judgmental” spectators with downcast eyes conveniently divorced from the practical realities of social change on the ground. In any case, the point to be made is that this a real conflict, not an imaginary one that could be cleared up simply by putting the climate situation in the right perspective. Given the existential logic of systemic climate change as a material and historical problem with little to no solutions in easy reach on the horizon, there’s a sense in which both positions accurately reflect the deeply paradoxical situation we find ourselves in today. The climate paradox is as real as the philosophical paradox of relating ‘subject’ and ‘object’ that has occupied some of the most brilliant thinkers in the West for centuries. Indeed, I can’t think of a better, more

complete embodiment of the subject/object paradox in all its implications than the climate paradox represented by the political quandary of transition.

In this chapter, I analyze academic debates in the climate literature concerning public motivation that, in my view, exemplify the paradoxical logic of climate response dividing problem-driven and solution-driven approaches to this issue. Just as the structural analysis of the ethical quandary of denial in chapter two set the stage for the lifeworld alternative in the chapter that followed, this chapter introduces the political quandary of transition in preparation for the next. Specifically, this chapter cross-analyzes what I call “hard medicine realism” and “positive vision culturalism” at their logical extremes as conflicting ideal types of problem-driven and solution-driven strategies of motivating climate response, respectively. Specifically, to the extent that the hard medicine position embodies a “logic of ethical responsibility” while the positive vision stance centers instead on a “logic of political intentionality,” I argue that each position represents *monological*, not dialogical, approaches to the climate situation—and ultimately *reactive*, not responsive, relations to this paradoxical issue. Recalling Jamieson and Gardiner, these monological positions express one-sided philosophies of human motivation that, in the final analysis, bury the deeper challenge of productively mediating problem and solution, question and answer. Invoking Merleau-Ponty, they miss “the relation of motivation” essential to the kind of fully-embodied response ultimately required to collectively overcome the existential problem. In lieu of monological reactions, I draw on Merleau-Ponty for a critical phenomenology sensitive to the political quandary of transition outlined below.

### ***Logics of Public Motivation: Hard Medicine Realism Vs. Positive Vision Culturalism***

Public inaction on climate change is particularly concerning insofar as there is reason to believe that grassroots political movements are our best, if not only, hope for successfully addressing this systemic problem for what it is. Fortunately, research across disciplines has come to focus on questions of public engagement on climate change. Short of outright denial (or perhaps tied to it), what generally orients one's basic response to climate change in the process of taking responsibility for it? The most conspicuous and pressing issue here arguably concerns the glaring disconnect between what the climate problem itself *ethically demands* and what is *politically possible* moving forward. In important ways, this disjuncture is reflected in the divide between radical climate justice movements (like the climate camps) and the climate pragmatists that the former largely rebelled against. Divides like this speak to a larger existential split that everyone has to struggle with to some extent when confronting complicated and ambiguous problems. But this split is acutely pitched in the case of radical climate movements precisely to the extent that they have ethically dedicated themselves to problem-driven action in the political arena where solutions, not just resistance, are needed to inspire and orient such action. How do people in this position come to terms with the climate abyss between reality and possibility? Can they mediate this stark disconnect between the actuality of climate change and the potentiality of a socially just and ecologically sustainable future?

In the realm of climate communications, Rosemary Randall (2009) observes that attempts to motivate public engagement take the form of "two parallel and disconnected narratives," depending on whether communicators frame climate change as a problem or focus on solutions. The dominant theme of the "problem narrative," she contends, centers

on the prospects of loss. After years of frustration in the face of complacency, climate change is often presented as catastrophic or apocalyptic. The mood here is one of dire seriousness and urgency, and the call is to shed the illusion that we are insulated from what is in fact a crisis and wake up to reality before it's too late. In stark contrast, Randall explains, "solution narratives" tend to circumvent questions of loss all together. If the problem narrative presents climate change as an external threat that ethically demands immediate and decisive action, the solution narrative usually asks for politically manageable, nonthreatening adjustments: a transition to green consumerism, carpooling, voting for enlightened politicians. At its zenith, perhaps, this takes the form of a cultural paradigm shift or a lifestyle politics (as in eco-villages) that affirms post-materialist values, the virtues of mindfulness and voluntary simplicity, communal bonds, the self-reliance afforded by do-it-yourself skills, and so on.

As a climate psychologist, Randall's concern with these irreconcilable narratives is that they offer no medium from which to meaningfully process the implications of this issue. Philosophers, for their part, might notice a number of key dualisms at play structuring the logic dividing these positions (discussed below). But politically speaking, I specifically want to draw attention to the assumptions in play about what *motivates* collective behavior. Insofar as theories of public motivation find expression in climate discourses, they tend to find philosophical consistency in one of two basic camps that parallel the narratives noticed by Randall.

Hard medicine realism, to begin with, goes back decades to the beginnings of the climate movement, often under the leadership of scientists like James Hansen. The attempt here is to galvanize public action by conveying the grim scientific reality of

climate change as an irreconcilable truth that needs to be swallowed whole for our own good. Once people snap out of the myopic bubble of their everyday concerns and come to grips with the reality of the broader situation we all find ourselves in, they will naturally be motivated to act.

Perhaps an important precedent for this approach comes from the political success achieved in response to another global environmental problem. In the late 1980s, as the climate movement was just beginning to develop, the Montreal Protocol was passed to address ozone depletion thanks in large part to the efforts of scientists warning of the stark dangers of CFCs accumulating in the atmosphere.<sup>83</sup> What worked to put the ozone problem on the political map, it was hoped, would do the same for the climate issue.<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately, however, the political differences between the ozone issue and climate change have proven to be quite significant. In particular, HFCs, a chemical alternative to CFCs, were already an economically (and thus politically) viable alternative. Fossil fuels, by contrast, were (and continue to be) deeply systemic to the economy. In the end, the ozone issue won decisive political attention and success where the climate issue has not.

There is almost certainly a rational actor theory of human motivation lurking in the background of hard medicine realism that might very well have been reinforced by the political success of the Montreal Protocol. After years of frustration trying to scientifically educate an unenlightened public on the clear dangers of climate change,

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<sup>83</sup> Ironically, this (reductive technocratic) solution to the ozone problem has exacerbated the climate problem in that HFCs are a powerful greenhouse gas. As Magdoff and Foster (2011, 110) write: “HFCs turn out to have over 4,000 times the heat-trapping ability of CO<sub>2</sub>, thus worsening global warming.”

<sup>84</sup> According to Jamieson (2014, 31), “This success [of the Montreal Protocol], which had occurred very quickly by the standards of international diplomacy, led to a sense of optimism that, with the help of the scientific community, the nations of the world could successfully address the problem of climate change.”

however, it isn't difficult to imagine rational actor assumptions of motivation transitioning to a politics of fear. Reinforced by images of calving ice sheets and natural disasters, together with apocalyptic narratives forecasting sea-level rise, species extinction, crop failure, and geopolitical destabilization, a jolt seems needed to break the irrational inertia of everyday life to spur collective action. Perhaps, like Plato, it's assumed that human reason only ascends to the light of day once unchained from the embodied world of mere appearance and the norms of public opinion mystifying reality.

As alluded to in the previous chapter, however, a growing number of researchers are discovering that knowledge or fear alone isn't working. Climate denial, they argue, doesn't boil down to a lack of accurate information, knowledge, or awareness. Indeed, many are increasingly aware of the kind of studies referenced by Norgaard suggesting that knowledge tends to *exacerbate* denial, not cure it as rational actor theories predict. Once it's felt that there is, in fact, no easy bridge from problem to solution (that politicians or scientific, technological, and economic experts cannot simply be relied on to solve the climate problem for us), strategies of denial are often employed to cope with the fear, anxiety, guilt, and other overwhelming emotions that result. Applying this insight to the climate ethics literature, moreover, one could add that approaches centered on *clarifying* the ethical implications of the climate problem likewise run the risk of deepening, not overcoming, climate denial.

A growing sensitivity to the emotional or affective dimensions of climate denial has led many researchers and communicators to embrace what I refer to as a "positive vision" approach that roundly rejects rational actor theories of motivation in favor of what might be described as cultural theories of motivation. Perhaps carefully chosen

rhetorical frames, metaphors, and “narrative strategies” are needed to mobilize political action. As mentioned in chapter one, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus (2007) made this point perfectly clear in their influential rebuke of gloom-and-doom environmentalists that Martin Luther King Jr. didn’t galvanize the American Civil Rights movement with an “I have a nightmare” speech. It was the *dream* that inspired change. Likewise in response to climate change, the failing environmental movement needs to move aside to make room for a visionary “politics of possibility.”

Since making this point, there has been an increasingly confident tendency in the climate literature to critique apocalyptic rhetoric as counterproductive. Eddie Yuen (2012, 15), for instance, notes the prevalence of “undifferentiated catastrophist discourse that presume apocalyptic warnings will lead to political action” and cites studies that demonstrate the opposite. Focusing instead on “the question of politicization,” Yuen (Ibid, 16) asks: “what narrative strategies are likely to generate effective and radical social movements?”

But interestingly, one of the most influential and philosophically-oriented proponents of this stance comes from an accomplished climate scientists-turned-humanist. Mike Hulme argues that we cannot successfully address climate change if we continue to approach it scientifically as a material problem in need of rational policy solutions. Thinking that jumps from problems to solutions, he says, hollows out cultural forms of meaning that could help people confront this issue.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, motivation by

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<sup>85</sup> It’s worth noting that the of jump from problem to solution that concerns Hulme is not the same as the “jump” made by climate pragmatists discussed in chapter two, but just the opposite. As I’ve argued, the pragmatic jump is motivated by the imperative to find solutions deemed realistic in the political world where power counts for everything. In sharp contrast, the jump troubling Hulme isn’t stuck on political solutions but on the *problem*. With no way of culturally translating the science of climate change where *facts* count to

fear is equally unproductive. Instead of presenting this issue as an ominous threat, therefore, he suggests that people creatively mobilize the *idea* of climate change to redefine the human project. Ultimately, Hulme concludes, we need to shift our basic questions about climate change.

I suggest we need to reveal the creative psychological, ethical and spiritual work that climate change is doing for us. Understanding the ways in which climate change connects with foundational human instincts opens up possibilities for re-situating culture and the human spirit at the heart of our understanding of our changing climate. Rather than catalysing disagreements about how, when and where to tackle climate change, the idea of climate change should be seen as an intellectual resource around which our collective and personal identities and projects can form and take shape. We need to ask not what we can do for climate change, but to ask what climate change can do for us. (Hulme 2009, 326)

Such a reversal in logic from a problem-driven to a solution-driven response would treat climate change as “a stimulus *for* societal adaptation, a stimulus that—rather than threatening civilization—can accelerate the development of new complex civil and social structures” (Ibid, 31).

The *raison d'être* of positive vision culturalism is to politicize climate change more fully and inclusively, and a consistent worry for Hulme is that public attitudes about the prospects for addressing this issue have become fatalistic in the face of apocalyptic narratives.<sup>86</sup> In “Reducing the Future to Climate,” Hulme (2011, 245) associates this fatalism with the emergence of a “new climate reductionism...driven by the hegemony

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the politics of public concern where *meaning* counts, it might be more accurate to say that, despite their intentions, hard medicine realists don't really jump to solutions at all—or that they merely jump in place.

<sup>86</sup> On this point, there are significant differences in orientation between climate pragmatism and positive vision culturalism. Although I generalize both positions as “solution-driven” on political grounds, the former tends to be pro-establishment and the latter anti-establishment. The pragmatists of chapter two, that is, hope to enlist powerful decision-makers to the cause by making climate change work for the system. As we shall see further below, however, proponents of positive vision culturalism like Hulme, Erik Swyngedouw, and Amanda Manchin want to enlist the public—particularly the disenfranchised—*against* the establishment forces controlling the dominant climate narrative for the sake of protecting the status quo.

exercised by the predictive natural sciences over contingent, imaginative, and humanistic accounts of social life and visions of the future.” Not to be confused with climate *determinism*, developed long ago to justify colonialization by pointing to Europe’s climate as a legitimizing explanation of their “racial superiority,” climate reductionism reduces the future to the predicted consequences of a changing climate. Common to both, however, is a politics that dangerously blends nature and history.

Specifically, climate reductionism is fueled by an inordinate confidence in the power of computer modeling to scientifically predict the future social consequences of a changing climate based on current emission trends. For Hulme, however, this faith in prediction ignores the human capacity to creatively and imaginatively respond to unpredictable contingencies, and thus *open* the future up to unforeseen horizons of possibility. Worse, the tendency to externalize and foreclose history in advance feeds into and reinforces an anxious narrative about the future “nurtured by elements of a Western cultural pessimism that promotes the pathologies of vulnerability, fatalism, and fear” (Ibid, 265). Ultimately, these mutually reinforcing tendencies hold “the human will...hostage to the fortunes of climate, too passive and too powerless to respond proactively” (Ibid, 250).

By stripping the future of much of its social, cultural, or political dynamism, climate reductionism renders the future free of visions, ideologies, and values. The future thus becomes overdetermined. Yet the future is of course very far from being an ideology-free zone. It is precisely the most important territory over which battles of belief, ideologies, and social values have to be fought. And it is these imagined and fought-over visions of the future that—in many indeterminate ways—will shape the impacts of anthropogenic climate change as much as will changes in physical climate alone. (Ibid, 264-265)

Erik Swyngedouw (2010, 219) goes further still. He argues that “apocalyptic imaginaries are an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism.” For him, the demand for urgent action on climate change has been appropriated and mainstreamed in ways that signal the neoliberal foreclosure of democracy itself. Invoking “a common condition or predicament, the need for common humanity-wide action, [and] mutual collaboration and cooperation,” post-political “ecologies of fear” serve to reinforce status-quo power relations by smoothing over different visions of the future that might bring the one-dimensional universe of neoliberalism into question (Ibid, 223).

Green politics, from the German Green Party to Greenpeace, are fully implicated here. Unlike the political struggles of the past that “signal a positively embodied content with respect to the future,” Swyngedouw argues, “an ecologically and climatologically different future world is only captured in its negativity...without a positive injunction that ‘transcends’/sublimates negativity” (Ibid, 24). This insight is essential to the logic of positive vision culturalism, but perhaps it is Yuen (2012, 42-43) that summarizes this position most succinctly:

Any new movement must be rooted in networks of communities and activists who are engaged in self-organization—no organization or leader can conjure this into being. These new movements can’t wait for capitalism to implode before offering solutions—and solutions must be prefigured and practical as well as visionary and participatory. A central lesson to take from the failure of catastrophism is that such a movement must make a positive appeal to community and solidarity rather than a moralistic plea for austerity and discipline...[I]t is vital that a movement offer something positive to go with the cold porridge of climate catastrophe. This something...is an opportunity to escape alienation and exploitation for a chance to build something new.

Taking the post-political condition seriously, Swyngedouw (2010, 229) concludes, requires turning “the climate question into a question of democracy and its meaning.” This is precisely why Hulme focuses on the “idea” of climate change rather

than its material reality. He certainly doesn't deny this reality (he made his name as a top climate scientist, after all), but every attempt is made to emphasize the construction of climate change and culturally internalize it as an idea in order to challenge realist discourses that externalize it. Whenever the significance of climate change is externalized as a common natural and historical condition that ethically "demands" consensus as such, it depoliticizes the issue by running roughshod over different ways of meaningfully engaging it. "Facts do not speak for themselves," Hulme (2015, 895) says, because our response depends primarily on what they *mean* to us. Our intentional judgements, particularly those informed by cultural visions of the future, are the final arbiter. "Since climate change prompts us to think about the future and about human responsibility for that future, cosmologies, ideologies, and cultural practices become relevant and motivating. These rich and historically mediated human attributes help us to pass judgement on the facts (Ibid, 897)."

The political ideal emerging from this premise—that truly responding to climate change pivots on how it (as an idea) speaks to different identities—culminates in "a polycentric world of pluralist views and preferences" (Hulme 2010b, 18). Amanda Machin takes this anti-foundationalist logic to its ultimate political conclusion through the lens of radical democracy. Critical of any political theory oriented towards agreement or consensus, she argues that collective action is only possible if premised on disagreement. Like Hulme and Swyngedouw, she dismisses political references to natural or historical facticity as the ruse of hegemonic interests. In so doing, she insists that there isn't anything to appeal to for common ground. This includes any appeals for reasoning together (as with deliberative democracy), since this too presumes some kind of

commonly agreed-upon framework of rationality intended to transcend difference. If continuity between cultural identities doesn't in fact exist, Manchin concludes, we have no choice but to develop an "agonistic" politics that wholeheartedly accepts and indeed celebrates difference.

A reference point common to Hulme and Manchin is post-structuralist Chantal Mouffe who, in reaction to the meta-narrative attributed to Marx's materialism, offers instead a politics of "agonistic pluralism." The "post-Marxist" idea here is that celebrating and encouraging political disagreement will enable, not disable, collective action. Choice, after all, is only real in the context of meaningful alternatives. Rather than bypassing conflict by soaring above it in the name of scientific urgency, therefore, a plurality of visions must to be worked out in the deeply-contingent thickness of political contestation in order to fire the human imagination and creatively open the future to new horizons of possibility scarcely perceivable today. Once it's recognized that science is "always value-laden, and...embedded within a particular cultural imaginary, alternative perspectives are opened up" to politicize this issue more inclusively and effectively (Manchin 2013, 94-95).

Yet, by dismissing standard accounts of the climate issue by reducing nature and history to the disparate meanings constructed by various collectives, doesn't the positive vision stance of affirming the "empowerment of alternative imaginaries and meanings of climate change" come at the cost of cross-cultural forms of dialogue? (Ibid, 95). Dialogue, after all, not only includes a respect for difference but the mutual traction that comes with being commonly situated. The problem with tendencies to begin and end with what is uniquely meaningful to collective experience is that any proposals for mediation

are easily dismissed. As Yuen (2012, 42) states, for instance, the wide-ranging climate justice movements we need today “must be rooted in networks of communities and activists” presumably from diverse backgrounds. In my view, the cultural logic of radical democracy trades one problem for another by rejecting what is common to the situation to make room for difference. Consider, for instance, Manchin’s suggestion to grasp politics in terms of “parallax,” a concept borrowed from astronomy in which the appearance of a celestial object depends on the location of the observer.

For Slavoj Žižek, for example, a parallax involves a ‘constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus, there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space...’ Perhaps climate change is a parallax in this sense, something that cannot ever be directly observed but is seen from a multiplicity and diversity of standpoints. (Manchin 2013, 88)

The political ontology corresponding to this view is what Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and other proponents of radical democracy call “antagonism” (as distinct from agonism). Politics here isn’t simply a matter of conflicting *interests* (viz. liberalism), but rather conflicting *identities*.

‘Antagonism’...exists between ‘us’ and ‘them’; the ‘us’ needs a ‘them’ to constitute itself as an identity, but the ‘them’ always threatens to destroy that identity. For Mouffe, therefore, the political realm is not a neutral space for discussion between fully formed identities with different perspectives that can be rationally reconsidered. Rather, the political realm is constituted by antagonistic relations. Any attempt to overcome or suppress conflict is therefore an attempt to eradicate the very political dimension of our society. (Ibid, 92)

Here we seem to have a kind of political state of nature in a rather Hobbesian sense, except that the atomistic units here aren’t self-interested egos in personal conflict but self-enclosed cultural identities in social or political conflict. Given the inevitability of an irreconcilable parallax of identities, Manchin continues, the question for Mouffe becomes

“how the us/them relation can be considered less violent yet not concealed” (Ibid). The answer is to transform ‘antagonism’ into ‘agonism’ whereby “political opponents are regarded as legitimate adversaries” based on “a common allegiance to shared values understood differently,” including a respect for democracy, liberty, and egalitarianism (Ibid, 92-93). Dismissed here are conceptions of agonism “as lying somewhere *between* consensus and antagonism” because consensus assumes that differences can and should be overcome (Ibid, 100). Here it is admitted that pure difference can only lead to a kind of naked violence between incommensurable collectives. Something quasi-universal is thus needed to lessen violence. But instead of invoking a contract-waving Leviathan of climate science to compel unity from an exalted position of authority, this ‘something’ must come from within. That is, instead of suggesting a “common allegiance” to nature or history “understood differently,” this common reference rests instead on internalized values committed to democracy, social justice, and so on.<sup>87</sup>

Yet, one might ask, doesn’t this emphasis on difference over consensus militate against political decision-making itself? Manchin turns this point on its head.

Decision, I assert, is underpinned not by consensus but by disagreement, for without a choice between real alternatives there can be no decision. A decision resides exactly at the disjunction between different options; that is what makes it a decision...To make a political decision, then, it is not just that there will be disagreement, but that there must. Collective action relies on political decision and therefore needs disagreement; thus the assumption that political disagreement hinders political action is mistaken. Political participants should be convinced not of the importance of *overcoming* disagreement, but rather of the importance of *disagreeing*.” (Ibid, 101-103)

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<sup>87</sup> Arguably, however, these remain vague and empty without common traction in historical and material conditions beyond lifeworld differences.

Although Manchin doesn't offer anything in the way of an ontology to substantiate this claim, it seems that her guiding assumption is, to quote Hulme again, that “[m]eaning-making precedes action,” and that meaning itself emerges primarily in the context of conflicting ideas.

The general logic of positive vision culturalism thus begins with concerns over fatalism and hegemony and responds with a pluralistic politics of constructed meanings and identities.<sup>88</sup> Once it sinks in that “external” nature, history, and the facts are indeed constructed for the sake of maintaining power, the spell of reification foreclosing alternative futures will break open. Different communities need the space to engage climate change in ways meaningful to *them* and welcomed into the arena of political debate accordingly in order to motivate collective action, not cowed into consensus by any fear-mongering legitimized by scientific authority. By creating the democratic space required to free up meaningful public engagement, a second dimension beyond the givens of contemporary social existence will open the future to more politically inclusive—and, it is hoped, post-carbon—horizons of possibility.

In the social sciences and humanities today, this anti-realist and anti-materialist strain of thought that I call positive vision culturalism has emerged with growing appeal. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising given the intellectual influence of the “cultural turn” of preceding decades in conjunction with the recognized failures of hard medicine realism over this same period. This cultural turn speaks to lessons of acknowledging the dynamics of power and respecting difference that still need to be learned, and the political dangers implicit in hard medicine realism are certainly a valid case in point. So

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<sup>88</sup> This finds expression in polycentric approaches to the collective action problem (see Ostrom 2010, 2012).

my point here isn't to dismiss the valuable contributions offered by Hulme, Swyngedouw, and Manhin. Reviewing the climate communications literature, I consistently see their point and share their concerns. Despite an encouraging move from hard medicine scientisim to more deliberative approaches meant to engage lifeworld differences, for instance, the tone in some of this literature is reliably top-down in orientation. The implicit questions seem to be: How can we "close the gap" between expert and lay discourses? Which tactics will finally get the public on board? In addition to "educating" the public, for instance, it has become common to employ social marketing techniques that encourage communicators to choose carefully framed narratives that pre-contextualize thought and deliberation before it begins.<sup>89</sup> Recognizing earlier failures, perhaps these subtler approaches are better conceived as "soft medicine" or "sugar-coated" realism. Rather than force-feeding the science, this more inviting approach sweetens the medicine by appealing to different tastes. In any case, the tacit goal of "consensus production" mediated by the professional class remains in place.

Indeed, the growing appeal of the positive vision critique is a welcomed sign of important lessons learned. Increasingly, behavioral researchers are taking values, emotions, and institutions seriously, not just knowledge or cognition; climate communicators are moving beyond scientifically educating the public by discovering the power of framing, metaphor, and narrative to reach people from where they stand; many analytic climate ethicists (like Jamieson) aren't content with formulating logically sound principles for decision-making but are calling for an ethical paradigm shift; and social and political theorists are looking beyond the reified institutional givens of existing

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<sup>89</sup> For a critique, see: Corner and Randall 2011.

conditions and emphasizing the need for “grassroots innovations” and a sociological, ecological, and moral “imagination” to move forward. Struggling with the complexities of engaging the public with a deeply systemic issue like climate change, it seems, is proving to be a catalyst for challenging old theoretical standbys, and cultural approaches seem to make the most sense for many at the moment.

Like their hard medicine counterparts, however, positive vision culturalism has serious political and philosophical problems of its own. By turning hard medicine realism around so that this issue “works for us” (i.e., one’s identity), for instance, the troubling implications of climate change risk being conveniently bypassed. To the extent that climate change is indeed a crisis that many cultures are *not* prepared for, perhaps some “hard medicine” anxiety is appropriate as a signal that we—as, yes, *human* beings *historically* related to material *nature*—are indeed in a bad situation that needs to be confronted, reflected on, and processed. In this respect, we might agree with Gus Speth’s (2008, 234) rejoinder to Shellenberger and Nordhaus’s “I have a nightmare” point when he argues that sometimes we need to be “reminded of the nightmare ahead.” For Speth, African Americans during the Civil Rights movement were *already* living the nightmare (and continue doing so). They needed the dream to pull them forward. By contrast, those of us resting comfortably in bad faith denial are simply dreaming.

However edifying as a critique, the anti-foundationalism of positive vision culturalism is just as one-sided as the foundationalism of hard medicine realism (as I argue further in the next section). Each position expresses invaluable kernels of truth, in my view, but taken together they thin out motivation in mutually exclusive (dualistic) directions to the extent that they reproduce the “problem” and “solution” narratives

identified by Randall. Taken at their “monological” extremes, each position ultimately expresses the existential abyss between ‘problem’ and ‘solution’ that I call the political quandary of transition. In the final analysis, I submit, the fully embodied motivation needed to confront and overcome this condition demands fluid communication between these positions. But before turning to a critical phenomenology of systemic transition in the next chapter to substantiate and answer this claim, I devote the rest of this chapter to fleshing out the political quandary of transition more fully. This begins below with a philosophical analysis of the dualistic logic setting the ethical motives centering hard medicine realism and the political motives orienting the positive vision stance in mutual conflict. Keep in mind, however, that the larger point setting the stage for chapter five is that these mutually exclusive positions can be thought of as intellectual expressions of what is in fact an existential condition.

### ***The Dualistic Logic of Ethical and Political Motivation***

At one extreme of the hard medicine perspective, people need to transcend traditional ways of being by working with nature and against the socio-cultural inertia of history. That is, whole societies must focus on the scientific reality of the climate problem, swallow their anxiety, and have the discipline to take ethical responsibility for climate change. From the positive vision perspective at the opposite end, effectively politicizing climate change requires challenging cultural hegemony and working with a diversity of identities. This involves respecting different ways of understanding climate change and giving different communities the space they need to openly envision the meaningful and hopeful futures essential to intrinsically motivating political involvement.

Insofar as both positions express valuable kernels of truth, and yet the logic of each ideal type is in basic conflict with the other, the problem of motivating collective action on climate change is a philosophical one. For example, the consistency of the positive vision stance largely comes from the wholesale rejection of one set of abstract categories (objectivity, nature, externality, passivity, unity, global, consensus) for another (subjectivity, culture, internality, activity, pluralism, local, dissensus). When logical coherence requires such wholesale trading, the problem of dualism lurks in the background. Importantly, however, this is an existential problem that is *lived*, not merely an academic puzzle to be solved. John Dewey (1958, 241-242) puts the matter well: “Consequences within philosophy as such are of no great import. But philosophical dualism is but a formulated recognition of an impasse in life; an impotence in interaction, inability to make effective transition, limitation of power to regulate and thereby to understand.” Indeed, when he defines dualism here as an “inability to make effective transition,” I should mention that my use of the term ‘transition’ in this chapter and the next (i.e., as a “political quandary”) parallels Dewey’s usage.<sup>90</sup>

In my view, the problem of motivating collective action on climate change brings the problem of dualism in this lived sense to a fevered pitch. While hard medicine realists (typically more scientifically than philosophically oriented) tend not to concern themselves with questions of dualism, positive vision culturalists often present their position as a decisive alternative to it. Hulme, Swyngedouw, and Manchin, for instance, are prepared to (rightly) accuse climate realists of dualism insofar as the latter insist on an

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<sup>90</sup> As I make clear in the final section of this chapter, however, I emphasize not just the cognitive but the affective and behavioral dimensions of this transition.

external nature and history that decisively transcends cultural interpretations of it. A constructivist stance, by contrast, realizes that one's access to the so-called external world is always internally mediated—i.e., intentionally directed towards cultural horizons and thus perspectival in orientation. Although the problem of dualism is widely acknowledged in academia and claims for overcoming it can seem ubiquitous and perhaps tiresome or even pointless, proposed “solutions” often take the form exemplified by positive vision culturalism in which one matrix of metaphysical categories are reduced to their opposites. So if (as Hulme points out), climate realists reduce culture and human agency to nature and history, the typical philosophical reaction to this is to offer a counter-reduction. In this respect, I submit that positive vision culturalism is equally dualistic despite claims to the contrary. Specifically, I argue that the latter position expresses something like a philosophy of (inter)subjective consciousness that is just as problematic as the monolithic objectivism expressed by their hard medicine counterparts (in one way or another, the logic of dualistic rationality always trades one set of problems for another). Given the ascendancy of the positive vision stance in the climate literature, I take charges of dualism leveled by positive vision critics of philosophical realism as established in this section, but question claims that they offer a non-dualistic alternative.

The first point to be made in this regard is that I treat dualism primarily as a kind of existential condition that (among other things) structures rationality, not a problem confronting substance metaphysics. That is, dualism doesn't just amount to conceptually segregating the poles of existence—subject/object, mind/body, culture/nature—into independent spheres. As Dewey recognized, the signature of dualism is the *lived incommunicability* of the poles in question. This is precisely why tired “solutions” that

conceptually reduce one pole to its opposite reinforce, rather than overcome, dualism. Hence, as Val Plumwood (1993) argues, dualism not only expresses, say, culture-nature or self-other separation, but also forms of nature-culture or self-other *unity*. Weighing into environmental debates over the significance of wilderness, she philosophically and politically analyzes constructivists charges of dualism against ecocentric realists that center on the organic integrity of wild nature uncorrupted by human agency.<sup>91</sup> Plumwood argues that both positions are in fact dualistic, and politically problematic as such.

Furthermore, dualism isn't merely conceptual, as in the separation of categories like mind and body, culture and nature, and so on. From the traditional philosophical perspective, the cure for dualism lies in monistic unification. But dualism, Plumwood argues, is first of all a logic—a deeply political one with ancient roots—premised on *normatively* privileging one pole over its assigned opposite in a hierarchical relation. Dualism isn't simply concern the metaphysical structure of the cosmos beyond human affairs. On the contrary, it expresses an *orientation*. So to the extent that constructivists equate dualism with conceptions of Nature as the ultimate externality “out there” on a separate plane from human existence, they miss the deeper meaning of dualism on this view as a normative logic structuring and orientating rationality. Beyond signifying the non-human “Other,” dualistic conceptions “otherize” nature as a *void*—the essentially indeterminate, incomplete, and passive—that requires something *else* for realization. This “something else” could be the agency of God, of human reason, or (more recently) of

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<sup>91</sup> In the American tradition, this includes Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold. Taken together, these figures have had a profound influence on what environmental ethicists/philosophers have called ecocentrism. Expressed in environmental activists like Earth First! and academic movements like Deep Ecology, ecocentrists often exalt wilderness preservation as leverage against anthropocentric projects to dominate/humanize nature.

human culture. In its full implications, nature signifies all that which is “nothing,” waiting in quiet reserve to become a “something.” As a normative orientation, dualism articulates a one-way relation from passivity to activity, or from potentiality to actuality, once agency finds the raw material it needs to act on things and bring them into being. This is what places the nature pole in a *dependent* relation to its—independent, autonomous—counterpart. It is from this perspective, therefore, that monistic reductions of external nature to cultural constructions of it serve to reproduce, not transcend, dualism.

Although guided by laudable intentions to clear the way for a plurality of equitable, non-hierarchical social relations, the logic of constructivism deepens the anthropocentric logic of hierarchical socio-ecological relations. Certainly, from a purely environmental perspective, this move is problematic. But Marxists such as Marcuse and ecofeminists like Plumwood understand that domineering socio-ecological relations and domineering social relations ultimately belong to one another as common expressions of a certain logic or way of being in the world.<sup>92</sup> This common logic finds practical expression in capitalist economies structured to systemically exploit human and natural “resources” alike. But with regards to the cultural logic of dualism structuring hierarchical relations to the world more generally, it has to be added that the metaphysics

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<sup>92</sup>The term “logic of domination” became popular with many ecofeminists, particularly via Karen Warren (1990). But to my knowledge, it was introduced by Marcuse (1964) in a chapter of *One-Dimensional Man* entitled, “From Negative to Positive Thinking: Technological Rationality and the Logic of Domination.” In essential respects, the theme of technological rationality as a logic of domination takes up and expands Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno’s (1972, 4) thesis two decades earlier that “[t]echnology is the essence” of scientific knowledge, whereby “[w]hat men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men.” But furthermore, this chapter is interesting in that it comprehensively relates many of the themes discussed in these dissertation chapters, like Husserl’s lifeworld genealogy of the mathematization of nature, Heidegger’s philosophy of technology as the instrumentalization of nature, the constituting subject (the premise of constructivism) that predetermines experience, and the logic of unmediated dualism.

of nature extends beyond the nature/culture relation. As an ancient organizing principle sedimented deep in the background of lifeworld existence, the Western concept of nature doesn't just signify the other side of culture (the latter understood as the essence distinguishing human existence). This all-important concept is also charged with structuring essential differences *within* the human world. That is, it plays a central role articulating social relations of dependency to the extent that some groups are deemed more "human" than their "natural" counterparts.

To get a better sense of this, we should consider Plato and Aristotle, for whom the logical counterpart of nature wasn't culture but more specifically reason. Where the rational soul enjoys unique access to the *logos* of things and can therefore exercise autonomous control for the sake of improving existence, nature denotes all that lacks—but could benefit from—this special access. As Aristotle famously explains in *Politics*, *physis* not only characterizes wild animals and the environment, but also finds expression in those hopelessly embodied human beings whose "natures" manifest a deficiency in rationality (e.g., slaves, women, peasants, barbarians) relative to Greek, male, property-owners (philosophers in particular). Hence, all for the same basic reason, humans are normatively superior to animals, domestic animals are superior to wild ones, Greeks are superior to savage barbarians, men are superior to women, and property-owners are superior to slaves and peasants. The relatively irrational "natures" of the latter categories are improved or substantiated to the extent that they are brought into relation with their more "rational" counterparts.<sup>93</sup> The project of human dominion over nature (as

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<sup>93</sup> Val Plumwood (1993, 46) reproduces the following passage from Aristotle's *Politics* (book 1, chapters 4-5) which, in one sweep, relates the logic he employs to justify slavery to the domination of women and nature: "It is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element over the passionate,

articulated via the root metaphor of nature as a machine and the anti-primitivist meta-narrative of historical progress previously discussed) thus finds comprehensive lifeworld consistency in a logic of dependency that includes domineering social relations as well.

Indeed, Plumwood's insight here has roots in the traditions of existential phenomenology and feminist philosophy thanks to the pioneering work of Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir exposed this logic of dependency in *The Second Sex* where she focused primarily on *freedom*, rather than reason, as the legitimizing essence of human agency in general and male identity in particular. Within this framework, her account of the logic of patriarchy identifies Man as the independent Self and Woman as the dependent Other. The premise here is that Man experiences an uncomfortably ambiguous relationship to Nature and Woman, and it is precisely the *suppression* of that ambiguity that motivates the dualistic logic of patriarchy.<sup>94</sup>

Man seeks the Other in woman as Nature and as his peer. But Nature inspires ambivalent feelings in man...He exploits it, but it crushes him; he is born from and dies in it; it is the source of his being and the kingdom he bends to his will...But since the coming of

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is natural and expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good for animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind. Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals, (as is the case of those who business it is to use their body, and can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master. For he who can be, and therefore is, another's and he who participates in rational principle enough to apprehend but not enough to have such principle, is a slave by nature. Whereas lower animals cannot even apprehend such a principle; they obey their instincts. And indeed the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life...It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right."

<sup>94</sup> The philosophical significance of 'ambiguity' is raised more explicitly in the next chapter with Merleau-Ponty, a figure with whom she appears to have shared mutual influences. The significance of ambiguity is fundamental to the "paradoxical logic" of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy promised in the dissertation's introduction. With respect to the third chapter, one might relate the suppression of climate ambiguity to expressions of denial or the existential problem as a reactive defense. In essential respects, therefore, Beauvoir's analysis of the patriarchal logic of dualism as the suppression of ambiguity reaches back to the previous chapter and feeds into the next one where I advance a dialogical ontology of climate response inspired by Merleau-Ponty and Plumwood.

patriarchy, life in man's eyes has taken on a dual aspect: it is consciousness, will, transcendence, it is intellect; and it is matter, passivity, immanence, it is flesh. (Beauvoir 2010, 163)

Just as Plumwood doesn't think that dualism can be vanquished by reducing nature to culture (or vice-versa), Beauvoir doesn't believe that overcoming patriarchal dualism involves collapsing sexual difference into a uniformly-gendered humanity. As critics of liberal/equality feminism argue, liberation doesn't boil down to breaking the shackles of femininity to gain access to the privileged forms of existence reserved for men, since the normative standards of the latter are patriarchal in the first place. Feminist projects should be focused on transcending the logic of patriarchy, not the self-defeating task of making patriarchy work for all. If patriarchy includes the domination of all human (and nonhuman) others, then addressing male oppression by assimilating women into the patriarchal fold merely reinstates the original dualism justifying patriarchy to begin with. Hence, exchanging the patriarchal logic of exclusion for one of inclusion might help mollify the problem of patriarchy, but not solve it. This point applies to other hierarchical power relations as well (encouraging many feminists to expand their projects of liberation beyond white women in the Global North). The solution to racism or colonialism isn't simply to assimilate, say, people of color into white society, indigenous peoples into civilization, or "undeveloped" nations into "developed" ones. Overcoming the dualistic logic of autonomy/dependency requires finding a medium in which differences (human/nature, women/men, self/other, etc.) can be respected for what they are, while

finding the continuity or common ground required to soften hard distinctions and ultimately cultivate dialogical forms of communication.<sup>95</sup>

Hence, going back to Plumwood's ecofeminist critique of the cultural logic of constructivism in the context of the wilderness debate (in solidarity with certain strains of feminist, post-colonial, and critical race theory), Plumwood argues that "postmodern nature skepticism" is a clear expression of the dualism it claims to have transcended. The latter are certainly right that nature cannot be set apart as the nonhuman Other as wilderness realists assume, but it is just as problematic to incorporate the nonhuman world as a construction by eliminating the culture/nature distinction altogether. Consistent with Greek and modern metaphysics, this move continues the tradition of relegating nature to mere passivity—as a lack or as the indeterminate without a positive identity or an autonomous presence of its own.

But such cultural reductionism...would abolish conceptual conditions for sensitivity to nature's limits...These arguments...systematically overstate the human contribution and understate nature's contribution, testifying to the growing success of human insulation and self-enclosure. Those postmodernists who employ them may think of themselves as in opposition to the dominant tradition, but are in fact at one with its dualizing approach in continuing to represent the Other, nature, as an absence or void, and to demote its agency. (Plumwood 1998, 673-674)

This passage brings me to a further point concerning the normative significance of intentionality in the logic of culturalism. If hard medicine realism finds dualistic expression in a philosophy of objectivity in which the meaning of climate change is reduced to its transcultural reality, I suggest that there's a version of what Merleau-Ponty

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<sup>95</sup> Here we might recall Dewey's formulation of lived dualism quote earlier as a communication problem. Elsewhere he writes: "there is a natural bridge that joins the gap between existence and essence; namely communication" (Dewey 1958, 167). For Plumwood (2002), "dialogical" relations to the human and non-human world are needed to overcome the lived dualism expressed in "monological" relations.

calls the “philosophy of consciousness” (examined in the next chapter) in the background of positive vision culturalism. In those cases when positive vision proponents mention (usually in passing) climate change as a natural and historical reality, this is quickly followed up by emphasizing its cultural significance in ways that consistently center intentionality. For Hulme (2015, 894, 897): “The idea of climate change mobilizes very different meanings” and “[m]eaning-making precedes action.” From this premise, it makes sense that climate change is “a metaphor for the imagined future of human life” (Hulme 2010a, 36) and “a resourceful idea and a versatile explanation which can be moulded and mobilized to fulfill a bewildering array of political, social and psychological functions” (Hulme 2010c, 267). For Manchin (2013, 112), nature is constructed by culture both physically and as an idea, and “[t]his works the other way too; our cultures are conditioned by their location within our culturally-constructed nature.” In other words, the “other” side to the cultural construction of nature is that this cultural construction further conditions other cultural constructions. By all appearances, logical consistency demands beginning and ending with culture.

Philosophies of consciousness are largely marked by the traditional language of intentionality—that uniquely creative power human beings ostensibly have to situate *themselves* in the world moving into an open future.<sup>96</sup> As Eileen Crist (2008) points out, the language of constructivism—beginning with the word “construct”—is replete with metaphors of human intentionality: knowledge is produced, built, assembled, inscribed,

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<sup>96</sup> The qualifier “traditional” here is meant to distinguish relatively common or long-standing conceptions of intentionality from phenomenological treatments of this term. Although some of Husserl’s “existential” critics, like Heidegger and to some extent Merleau-Ponty, suggest that his (particularly early) conception of intentionality remains problematically tied to the cognitive subject of the tradition, he progressively complicated this traditional conception throughout his career leading up to his conception of the lifeworld where (arguably) it isn’t so clear whether activity or passivity have the upper hand.

invented, and so on. As we just saw, for Hulme climate change is a “resourceful idea” that can be “moulded,” “mobilized,” and “deployed.” Likewise, for Swyngedouw (2010), the post-political is an “historical production,” and thus “staged,” “forged,” “configured,” “choreographed,” etc. Given this condition, he continues, the “constitutive social differences” basic to a healthy democracy can be “recaptured” by “constructing different socio-environmental futures” made up of various “human-human and human-nature articulations and assemblages” (Ibid, 221, 228). The upshot, as Crist says, is that meaning is predominantly “assigned.”

To be clear, the constructivist language of intentionality isn’t meant to imply the world-positing subject of idealism or the rational utility-maximizing subject of liberalism. Rather, it’s an *intersubjective* intentionality of different monadic communities each projecting themselves into the future on the basis of shared meanings uniquely contingent to their experience. But regardless, Crist (2008, 503) explains, “[t]he idea of imputing meaning to the natural world presumes a standpoint separate from it.” And considering the agonistic stance of radical democracy, this standpoint not only emphasizes the separation of monadic communities from nature but also from each other. The one-sided accent on difference over continuity spans social and socio-ecological relations alike.

Turning next to the oppositional philosophies of *motivation* putting hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism into monological confrontation, we can more fully make sense of this dualistic conflict—and ultimately the political quandary of transition—in the climate context. In particular, I suggest, there’s an extent to which the hard medicine stance relies too heavily on ethical motives to compel a problem-driven approach to climate change while the positive vision perspective suffers the opposite

problem by leaning too strongly on political motives to invite democratic solutions. Capturing the monological philosophies of motivation pushing climate communicators to opposite sides of the abyss and talk past each other, it will be the task of the next chapter to invoke Merleau-Ponty's critical phenomenology to help mediate these motives by bringing them into dialogical relation.

### ***The Monological Voices of Ethical Responsibility and Political Intentionality***

Although the subject matter of climate response is anathema to drawing hard and fast lines, analytic distinctions such as the ones made in chapter two between cultural and social institutions or problem-driven and solution-driven motives are nevertheless indispensable. Given the philosophical logic of hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism discussed above, how should we understand the logic of motivation expressed in each position? This, I submit, sheds important philosophical light on the political quandary of transition. In important respects, the hard medicine position prioritizes ethical motives to galvanize a problem-driven response to change while the positive vision stance prioritizes political motives to empower a solution-driven response.

To the extent that we understand political motivation as a pursuit of interests, the existential meaning of politics speaks to collective ambitions to realize certain projects or ideals. In this sense, politics is, to borrow a term favored by Merleau-Ponty, largely a “centrifugal” projection of lifeworld intentions. Without doubt, positive cultural imaginaries—understood as cognitive dispositions toward future ideals, as well as hope as an aspirational affect, and empowerment as a behavioral disposition to materialize hopeful ideals in practice—are essential to political motivation.

Ethical motives, by contrast, can be seen in a slightly different light where the good, not just the desired, compels a given response to the given situation. Hence, an existential meaning of ethical responsibility wouldn't primarily emphasize the intentional materialization of projects as such (although this isn't necessarily incompatible with the good). Ethical motives are distinctly in play when they encourage people to take a mindful step back, honestly reflect and process things in good faith, and ultimately transcend their immediate assumptions and interests when the situation calls for it. Indeed, the most admirable ethical responses occur when inconvenient decisions need to be made in the face of facts that *interfere* with preexisting assumptions and interests. This occurs when the everyday intentions regulating "business as usual" in the background are, ironically, intentionally put in check out of respect for a higher good.

Political and ethical motives are thus intentional in some sense, but the predominant movement of these intentional acts distinguish each motive.<sup>97</sup> The difference between these intentional movements is that political motives project lifeworld intentions (norms, assumptions, interests) in an effort to "determine" the situation, while ethical motives tend to be more open to—and affected if not determined by—the weight of the situation as given. That is, the "centrifugal" motives characterizing political action tend towards lifeworld expression and projection, while the "centripetal" motives more characteristic of ethical reflection allow the contingent situation to inform and perhaps challenge lifeworld projects by compelling introspection and introjection.

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<sup>97</sup> Husserl distinguishes "operative intentionality" from "act intentionality," where the former is predominantly motivated by the preconscious background structures orienting everyday experience and the latter is motivated in response to the concrete givens of the situation (see Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxxii). This distinction is, in Merleau-Ponty's hands, central to the following chapter where I distinguish the "motivating" and the "motivated" elements of the dialogical response essential to overcoming the political quandary of transition in particular and the existential problem in particular.

It has to be stressed that the unmediated conflict between ethical and political motivation defining the quandary of transition is *lived*, not just conceived. The hard medicine and positive vision perspectives each find consistency in their own logic. Understood as ideal types, I suggest that the hard medicine stance embodies a *logic of ethical responsibility*, while the positive vision perspective expresses what I shall call a *logic of political intentionality*. As discussed in the next section, the lived logic of each stance includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of collective motivation (Whitmarsh 2009). Taken together, however, the cognitive-affective-behavioral comprehension articulating each position is, in dualistic fashion, in bipolar conflict with the other.

This conflict leaves us with a dilemma that is critical to the political quandary of transition. On the one hand, an ethical focus on the hard material realities and historic gravity of climate change as a systemic problem invites denial in the face of overwhelming anxiety and political paralysis in the face of hopelessness. When scientists liken climate change to an “angry beast,” or when likeminded journalists focus on visceral images that imply the coming apocalypse, political solutions are either ignored as the public takes shelter in escapism or they risk playing into the hands of “disaster capitalism” (where politicians with corporate donors in their back pocket wield shock and fear to justify evermore market-based and technocratic solutions like geoengineering or perhaps anti-democratic measures of austerity<sup>98</sup>). Furthermore, as many like scholar Kyle

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<sup>98</sup> The term “disaster capitalism” comes from Naomi Klein’s (2008) *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, the book preceding *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* widely referenced in this dissertation. She reports being drawn to the climate issue by the time she finished *The Shock Doctrine* after analyzing the push for market-based solutions and austerity measures in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans. This point is also emphasized in Eddie Yuen’s (2012, 37-38) essay “The Politics of Failure Have Failed: The Environmental Movement and Catastrophism,” where he writes: “What

P. Whyte argue, narratives of climate apocalypse easily reproduce a number of problematic cultural tendencies that, for instance, posit white middle-class Americans as the saving agents or protagonists of historical change while ignoring the experience of indigenous peoples already living the dystopic future imagined by these prophets of climate catastrophe.<sup>99</sup> And yet, centering on cultural visions of a better future to keep us from unraveling and to inspire political hope risks sugar-coating the issue. For instance, when pragmatists focused on political access counsel voters to be content with the “lesser of two evils” instead of organizing for grassroots change, ask consumers to buy hybrids or take “easy steps” rather than question consumerism, and stick to simple talking points like “green jobs” that promise economic mobility while burying difficult discussions about the growth imperative of capitalist economies, they conveniently justify ethical compromise by interpreting the problem through the lens of palatable solutions. Proponents of radical democracy and polycentrism, for their part, invite a politics of endless interpretation that scatters the climate problem into a phantasmagoria of competing concepts, norms, and values. This logic risks encouraging various groups to appropriate the climate issue as political leverage, each for their own ends. Insofar as the important kernels of truth centering hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism cancel each other out—and particularly to the extent that the motivation needed to

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remedy do most scientific experts suggest? For many of them, austerity is seen as inevitable in any case and better embraced affirmatively than imposed through a ‘hard landing’...The problem, however, is that the decision-making and consequences of this program are highly unequal. The solutions offered by global elites to catastrophe is a further program of austerity, belt-tightening, and sacrifice the brunt of which will be borne by the world’s poor.”

<sup>99</sup> The essay making this point, “Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral dystopias and fantasies of climate change crises” (Whyte 2018), was mentioned earlier in the context of the author’s critique of the film *Avatar* (see footnote 73).

overcome the socio-cultural barriers to collective action requires an ability to skillfully relate and negotiate imperatives for ethical responsibility *and* political intentionality—this dilemma will likely persist in lieu of truly responsive climate action.

The significance of this conflict becomes especially clear when considering the limitations of one position in light of the virtues of the other and vice-versa. Beginning with a hard medicine critique of positive vision culturalism, it can be said the logic of political intentionality is problematic insofar as it reduces, in Hulme’s words, the “idea” or meaning of climate change to what it can do “for us” in the agonistic sphere of competing interest. The logic of systemic climate change cannot be reduced to a political opportunity for different communities to realize preexisting cultural projects and aspirations. For those living in the industrialized societies most responsible for this problem, climate change is also a natural and historical phenomenon that profoundly challenges lifeworld assumptions (albeit in different and ways and to different degrees). If the meaning(s) of climate change is indeed to be received as a political stimulus to create new imaginaries and new forms of socio-cultural existence, this process has to include the kind of ethical reflection and dialogue that comes with being challenged or *questioned* by a problem that initially escapes one’s cultural grasp.

Cognitively speaking, cultural visions of a better future are useless as a means of political entry if climate change isn’t first conceived as a “real” or objective problem to begin with. Without coming to terms with climate change as a material reality that in part transcends inherited ideas, values, norms, and sensibilities, one imagines little motivation to create (let alone realize) cultural visions or “solutions.” Equally important, moreover, the motivation to culturally and politically respond to a problem presupposes being

*affected* by it. If respecting cultural difference for the sake of radical democracy encourages people to interpret climate change in ways that work “for us,” one’s felt reception of the climate issue will carry little more than the weight of an interpretation. Feeling the material and ethical gravity of climate change, however, one is likely to experience anxieties that are to some degree commensurate with the pressing weight of this problem. Hence, hope without this anxiety is likely to interpret the climate problem prematurely through the lens of preexisting “solutions.”

Finally, the positive vision logic of political intentionality is also consistent with climate pragmatism with respect to the *practical* conditions of involvement (the behavioral element).<sup>100</sup> Particularly for those lifeworld communities most privileged by the socio-cultural institutions responsible for climate change, the logic of political intentionality applies just as well to those bent on protecting business as usual as it does to those committed to challenging it. As argued in chapter two, the failures of climate pragmatism to sufficiently (ethically) focus on the systemic nature of the climate problem directly or indirectly mirrored their privileged social position in the professional class. Insofar as well-intentioned pragmatists ultimately found themselves sucked into the promise of political access (via corporate and state partnerships, etc.) as the only viable path forward, this largely reflects the practical conditions structuring their involvements. This political orientation towards “realistic” solutions, moreover, is naturally (logically) conducive to certain ways of thinking and feeling about the climate situation over others. For instance, pragmatic conceptions of the climate problem largely reflect their “win-win” understanding that climate change can indeed be solved technocratically (i.e., by the

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<sup>100</sup> Importantly, however, this consistency is far more philosophical than political.

very system that created it). This cognitive-behavioral orientation, moreover, inspires—and is inspired by—an exaggerated politics of optimistic hope prematurely focused on moving forward. But without solid footing in the climate problem as an orienting motive for action, inspirations of hope are vulnerable to political tactics of diversion and co-optation. Once threatened, otherwise cooperative regimes have shown themselves time and again to redirect or appropriate unanchored aspirations for “change” in ways that ultimately leave the landscape of status quo existence and institutionalized power safely intact. Ultimately, without the weight of natural and historical factuality felt in common, those with scientific and green perspectives have little leverage to seriously challenge, say, a “drill baby drill” worldview that is highly appealing to the most privileged and politically powerful beneficiaries of the carbon-intensive global economy.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, and this time in recognition of positive vision culturalism, it is equally true that intentionality is essential to confronting an existential threat like climate change (as acknowledged at the end of the previous chapter and the beginning of this one when introducing the political quandary of transition). The hard medicine logic of ethical responsibility arguably invites denial to the extent it speaks to what one *can't* do (business as usual) while being relatively silent on what we *can* do in response to this systemic problem. If motives for climate response are to grow into something more than a gut reaction to the problem at hand (as expressed in denial, misdirected moral outrage, cynical nihilism, etc.), it has to be intentionally oriented in a meaningful sense.

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<sup>101</sup> One final point can be made here. To the extent that the historical project of “human dominion over nature” is socio-culturally intertwined with domineering social relations, cutting nature and history out of politics for the sake of respecting cultural difference may be inimical to the *justice* side of the climate justice movement.

Even (or perhaps especially) sophisticated philosophical renewals of hard medicine realism that explicitly acknowledge the risks of anxiety-induced denial and the value of cultural vision can still fail if, in their one-sidedness, they leave questions about *how* we should respond to this existential threat unanswerable. The best example of this that I'm aware of can be seen in Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. If, in contrast to other versions of hard medicine realism, Scranton has an answer to the ethical quandary of climate denial, his position still reinforces the political quandary of transition by philosophically anchoring his reading of the climate situation almost exclusively on the problem side of the abyss. After reviewing the "wicked" problem of climate change as an expression of the Anthropocene, the book systematically dismantles *any* reasons for hope (including political activism) in order to clear the way for the most important existential task of our time: to accept the inevitable by letting go of our futile attachments to the carbon economy, our future, and ultimately our collective identities.

For humanity to survive in the Anthropocene, we need to learn to live with and through the end of our current civilization. Change, risk, conflict, and strife, and death are the very processes of life, and we cannot avoid them. We must learn to accept and adapt...The sooner we can confront our situation and realize there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality. (Scranton 2015, 22-23)

Unlike some of the scientifically-minded communicators of hard medicine realism, Scranton grasps the psychology of denial well enough to understand just how counterproductive the politics of fear are in the climate situation (and how philosophically outdated the rational actor theory that it relies on is). But instead of turning to positive vision culturalism, he argues that we need to find the raw courage to squarely confront fear and anxiety, not avoid it. Paralleling the Heidegger discussion in

the previous chapter, then, he submits that learning to die in the Anthropocene means transcending our collective ego and liberating ourselves from fear and anxiety precisely so that we can “freely respond” to the climate situation for what it is, which “means not reacting to it” (Ibid, 87-88). In the end, however, even this unusually thoughtful meditation on the existential implications of the climate situation offers little more than a call for disciplined transcendence for the sake of clear-eyed adaptation to changing material (external) conditions. Although Scranton may offer valuable wisdom to help us transcend our collective ego-identities living in the age of consumer capitalism, he doesn’t help us transcend the climate problem by working through it. Considering the other side of authentic responsibility, almost no counsel is given on how to positively and meaningfully *take up* the climate situation moving forward with intention.<sup>102</sup> Only a disciplined commitment to problems and questions seem permitted in the Anthropocene (where “[o]ur future promises to be as savage as our past” (Ibid, 75)), presumably under the assumption that hopeful solutions and meaningful answers are more likely to reinforce, not break through, denial.

Consider, for instance, the stark contrast between Hulme’s call for cultural expressions of meaning that “make the climate work for us” and Scranton’s (Ibid, 85) starting point (paralleling McKibben’s point) that the “enemy isn’t *out there*

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<sup>102</sup> There are some instances when Scranton acknowledges the need for new ideas and visions that initially seem agreeable to positive vision culturalism. But unlike Hulme, Swyngedouw, and Manchin, his call is predominantly oriented by the all-consuming imperative to adapt to changing material conditions for the sake of human survival (in addition to preserving the heritage of Western culture, particularly in the humanities, going back to antiquity). “If *Homo sapiens* survives the next millennium, it will be survival in a world unrecognizably different from the one we have known for the last 200,000 years. In order for us to adapt to this strange new world, we’re going to need more than scientific reports and military policy. We’re going to need new ideas. We’re going to need new myths and new stories, a new conceptual understanding of reality, and a new relationship to the deep polygot traditions of human culture that carbon-based capitalism has vitiated through commodification and assimilation. Over and against capitalism, we will need a new way of thinking about our collective existence. We need a new vision of who “we” are (Scranton 2015, 19).

somewhere—the enemy is ourselves.” From this standpoint, Scranton holds up “the interrupter” as the paragon of hard medicine virtue in the climate age (Ibid, 85-86). Invoking Socrates the gadfly who sees philosophy as a preparation for death “by learning how to separate the soul from the body,” he defines this “radical practice” as “the disciplined interruption of somatic and social flows, the detachment of consciousness from impulse, and the condensation of conceptual truths out of the granular data of experience. It is the study of ‘dying and being dead,’ a divestment from *this* life in favor of deeper investments in a life beyond ourselves” (Ibid, 91). Although Scranton is right to distinguish “interrupting” the naïve continuity of everyday life from “disrupting” it,<sup>103</sup> his emphasis on problem-driven ethical responsibility over solution-driven political intentionality remains clear.<sup>104</sup>

Interrupting what Lifton calls “malignant normality” is essential, but as I demonstrate in the following chapter, this task has to be complimented by positive visions that connect people to a meaningful future worth realizing for its own sake. Yet, still with an eye to the virtues of positive vision culturalism missed by their hard medicine counterparts, cultivating new connections to the future doesn’t mean cutting off cultural connections to the past. If future horizons of possibility are to be collectively heard in the present as a meaningful calling from the future, this can only happen by *refiguring*, not severing, collective relations to the cultural past. So although the scientific facts of climate change aren’t reducible to cultural constructions, it’s nevertheless true

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<sup>103</sup> Scranton (2015, 87) writes: “It’s not smashing, but sitting with. Not blockage, but reflection.”

<sup>104</sup> Anticipating Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical phenomenology of motivation in the next chapter, Scranton’s otherwise powerful meditation consistently puts the accent on being “motivated” by the climate situation as an immovable fact, at the expense of “motivating” meaningful projects that inspire us to creatively take up, not just adapt to, objective conditions.

that facts only make sense (cognitively) against a cultural background of “worldview” concepts. Intentionality is an important aspect of intelligibility. Concepts don’t stand alone but stand *out* as meaningful in the normative context of socio-cultural projects. That is, lifeworld backgrounds of intelligibility are charged with making sense of the (social or natural) givens of the lived present by drawing from a cultural past to structure how one actively takes up or responds to the situation at hand moving forward. Hulme is right that the facts are not intrinsically meaningful, or simply recorded by the rational mind before being translated into action. One’s response to science always expresses a meaningful purpose or implicit direction, however vague and indeterminate this might initially be. Insofar as the hard medicine strategy of waking people up by lacing scientific authority with fear involves breaking through—rather than working with—socio-cultural norms, values, and sensibilities, it should come as no surprise that organizations like The Heartland Institute supported by the fossil fuel industry find a hungry public ready to rationalize climate denial in self-defense. Indeed, without the cultural traction to make sense of the climate problem with *intention*, this issue isn’t likely to show up as a problem to begin with.

Cognitively speaking, then, questions without conceivable answers aren’t asked. But this insight applies to affect and behavior as well. Anxiety with no hope of finding a way out can lead to crushing despair (thus motivating a defensive reaction of some kind). At best, climate anxiety divorced from climate hope is likely to dampen the fortitude needed to process the hard realities of climate change. Coming to terms with facts that dramatically conflict with the socio-cultural assumptions and lifeworld projects affording existential traction in life requires inspiring ways forward—ways that take up the facts

precisely under the promise that one can indeed transcend them. Collectives must therefore breathe life into the facts. And finally, this implies that a problem-driven politics predominantly motivated by the imperative to resist institutional inertia (and ultimately overthrow powerful regimes) isn't likely to succeed in the long-term without positives alternatives to strive for. Overthrowing a given regime cannot simply mean demolishing the socio-cultural landscape that it relies on to maintain its legitimacy if this simply amounts to blasting historical (lifeworld) continuity and severing people's lifeline to the past.

It is in this sense, therefore, that the hard medicine logic of ethical responsibility and the positive vision logic of political intentionality are mutually exclusive in their one-sidedness. With respect to the systemic challenges of climate response, the monological voices of problem-driven and solution-driven approaches effectively talk past each other (and arguably the general public). And yet, the limitations of each position call for the virtues of their logical counterpart. This phenomenon, recall, parallels the reductive philosophies of collective motivation along the culture/society axis expressed by Jamieson and Gardiner. Except, in this context, the logic of reductivism doesn't just concern the ethical problem of collectively motivating a problem-driven response to climate change but rather on the more political problem of bringing problem-driven and solution-driven motives into productive relation. Although dualism is arguably characteristic of western thought and existence, the profound ambiguities and paradoxical logic of climate response seem to bring these ancient tendencies out into the stark open.

All of this is to say that the quandary of transition is an existential condition that is fundamentally philosophical in significance and political in consequence. Whether one

considers cultural vs. social motives for ethical action, or problem-driven motives for ethical responsibility vs. solution-driven motives for political empowerment, the philosophical and ultimately existential challenge is roughly the same: to find ways of coping with the myriad paradoxes of climate response by bringing each motive into conversation. However, before turning to Merleau-Ponty in the next chapter to prepare the ground for a critical phenomenology of climate response answerable to the political quandary of transition, I conclude this one by turning to climate movements where the monological dynamics of hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism find concrete expression across the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of lifeworld existence. In so doing, I complicate the logical consistency of each ideal type analytically abstracted above (the practical expression of any *a priori* logic is always “fuzzy” once situated in material context<sup>105</sup>), while nevertheless demonstrating more concretely the value of these interpretive frames to capture what is most essential about the climate situation: its resistance to motivating a collective response.

### ***The Logic of Cognition, Affect, and Behavior Expressed in (Climate) Action***

The tensions between the hard medicine and positive vision strategies for motivating collective action are surely present in all climate movements. Pragmatists, for example, often counsel easy positive steps for going green that are palatable to public sensibilities and inoffensive to their corporate and state partners, but are also known to

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<sup>105</sup> Phenomenologists going back to the early Husserl are particularly sensitive to what Alfred North Whitehead has termed the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, where (simply put) the ideal is taken for the real. It's essential, therefore, to keep analysis “grounded” when possible by situating theory in practical contexts—not only to support theoretical claims but to soften them in light of the “senseless” complexities and ambiguities of lived experience that remind us that theory is a helpful guide, not a blueprint, to making sense of things.

resort to hard medicine tactics to motivate political support when it would be expedient to do so. Rosewarne, *et al.*, moreover, observed this general tension in the radical climate camp movement as well. Some activists in the UK climate camps, for instance, argued “that the climate movement had to deliberately accentuate the positive” (Rosewarne, Goodman, and Pearse 2013, 89). The Australian climate camps that they studied, however, tended in the opposite direction.

At a 2008 UK Climate Camp workshop...the point was made clear: we all know that there is little in the way of hope, but if we want a movement we must use the language of hope. In this context, activists arrived at what may be called ‘strategic climate action’, a position that represses the reality. Activists may have found themselves welcoming climate policy initiatives that, while inadequate, at least signaled a willingness to address the problem. In this [Australian] study, we found activists producing different motivations for action. Rather than false hopes [that “deliberately accentuate the positive”], we saw an emerging model of ethical action where climate mobilisation did not necessarily depend on mitigating climate change, although it certainly hoped for this. It was grounded in a much more durable motive, one that said quite simply, this is the right thing to do...From this perspective activists could realistically despair at the inbuilt logic of climate change, and at the same time vest hopes in mass action to create new possibilities. (Ibid, 89-90)

These researchers report that many interviewees trace their activism to a period of deep ethical reflection and dialogue following the “moral shock” experienced as hard scientific certainties sunk in (Kent 2016, 107). In her study of carbon action groups (CAGs), Kent noticed the significance of this experience in her interviews as well. As many activists reported to Rosewarne, *et al.*, however, something like a dialectic of hard medicine anxiety (anguish, despair, fear) and positive vision hope (inspiration, meaning, connection) eventually took hold. Both poles motivated action but needed to be effectively mediated to deepen and sustain it. Several activists “spoke of having arrived at a self-conscious state of balance, a ‘combination of despair and hope’...The two needed to go together so that you don’t go crazy” (Rosewarne, Goodman, and Pearse 2013, 101).

As noted, the motivation of activists to take action was often assumed to revolve around the nexus between anger and hope. What was very clear here, was that hope was only part of the story, with despair and anger figuring at least as large. Involvement in the movement became a powerful antidote, as a means of reconnection, and as an ethical force for renewal. (Ibid)

Despite intimations of success productively managing anxieties and hopes, however, one of the major conclusions of the Rosewarne, *et al.* study was that the climate camp movement failed to *translate* this ethical urgency into a viable political strategy before dying out. Despite being the kind of grassroots climate movement that Cuomo would seem to approve of, the political bridge from ‘problem’ to ‘solution’, so promising in its construction perhaps, ultimately collapsed before completion under the historic weight of this existential challenge. Hence, it could certainly be argued in support of the positive vision position stance (particularly with reference to Swyngedouw) that the movement’s overwhelming focus on becoming steadfastly problem-driven eventually proved to “depoliticize” its solution-driven strategies for tangible success. As Rosewarne, *et al.* put it, the movement’s “meta-political” focus on the material demands of the climate crisis ultimately proved self-defeating.

The urgency for climate action can undermine efforts at movement building, as disagreements over strategy are deferred in favour of a lowest common denominator of metapolitical climate imperatives. The idea of ‘climate emergency’ might help put climate change on the political agenda, and one can say that it has been successful in this regard, from at least the early 1990s, but it is less helpful in ensuring the emergence of a sustained climate movement. The climate movement is clearly at an impasse, needing to develop a politics beyond the ‘metapolitical.’ (Ibid, 150)

When considering both ethical and political motives, therefore, the conflict between the hard medicine and positive vision approaches to motivating collective action remains a thorny one. On the one hand, the climate camps cultivated impressive ethical successes in becoming a truly problem-driven (anti-systemic) movement, but they

consistently struggled to acquire the political traction needed to bring solution-driven motives to fruition. Climate pragmatists, by contrast, suffered the opposite problem. The mainstream movement made impressive strides putting climate change on the political radar. But in their consequentialist drive for tangible success they failed to grasp the systemic depths of the problem and challenge institutionalized power accordingly.

Again, if we define ethical motives to address the grave implications of climate change as problem-driven in orientation and understand political motives to effectively respond as solution-driven, this leaves us with a bifurcation that cuts across the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of motivation. This point is worth reiterating (and situating more concretely) because the tri-partite *force* of this monological consistency on each side is precisely what forecloses—and indeed militates against—the dialogical response essential to climate agency. Just as the inertia and durability of collective existence has to be understood at the mutually reinforcing intersections of socio-cultural institutions (as opposed to treating social and cultural motives independently or reductively), the same point applies to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimension of motivation. The hard medicine logic of ethical responsibility and the positive vision logic of political intentionality each offer consistency across the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of motivation within their own spheres of coherence, but little to no consistency between them. This effectively leaves us with strong voices for climate action on each side, but no way of responding to the climate situation in the fully-embodied ways that truly historical problems of this depth require.

How, then, do these mutually exclusive voices find expression in climate movements?<sup>106</sup> Beginning with the hard medicine logic of ethical responsibility, the climate camp movement researched by Rosewarne, *et al.*, offers a good case study of the limitations of this logic in action—and, more importantly, demonstrate the need to dialogically incorporate the virtues of their positive vision counterparts. Although many activists certainly expressed hopeful ambitions for a future of climate justice, it can be argued that the movement was more firmly locked into the problem narrative, especially when compared to their pragmatic counterparts (against whom many self-proclaimed radicals identified themselves). Indeed, it may be that the problem-driven stance motivating many activists might not have been hopeful enough to sustain their personal involvement and ultimately the movement. Rosewarne, *et al.* (Ibid, 89) report that many radical activists endured in the politically hopeless situation of materializing systemic change by exchanging pragmatic hopes for the ethically “durable motive” of doing the right thing. In this sense, “climate mobilisation became an intrinsic necessity, an end in

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<sup>106</sup> To recap the tripartite consistency of each position, consider first from a cognitive perspective the proposition that ethical responses center on the “reality” of the climate problem disclosed by science, in contrast to political approaches oriented towards strategizing for “realistic” solutions to denial, reification, the intransigence of business as usual, etc. For hard medicine communicators, for example, we know that the ethical demand to focus on what nature *itself* requires should outweigh what political realism recommends. From the positive vision perspective, however, making progress requires creating the political space needed for different communities to express, not cap, what they really think against the lived history informing each identity. Turning to affectivity, moreover, ethical responses might encourage people to come to terms with the problem by taking disciplined responsibility for their fears and anxieties, while political strategies focus on solutions fueled by hopes for a better future. Hence, the hard medicine stance asks people to authentically confront the problem, not sugar-coat it with glossy hopes and wishful thinking. Positive vision proponents, on the other hand, would recognize that minimizing denial and empowering action requires working with—not overriding—people’s aspirations by giving them something positive (meaningful) to take up and strive for. And finally, with respect to practical behavior, the ethical logic of hard medicine realism could either encourage top-down austerity and authoritarianism or else try to electrify fire-breathing grassroots movements that also sweep over socio-cultural conditions/differences for the sake of immediate and decisive action. By contrast, solution-oriented political responses might, in pragmatic form, invite the public to take easy steps for going green in their everyday lives or cultivate working relationships with powerful stakeholders. In radical democratic form, moreover, they might work with different communities or encourage each to organize themselves around the climate issue in ways that give voice to their own interests.

itself, regardless of any anticipated outcomes (Ibid). Stated this way, one intuitively feels something like a categorical imperative to act over consequentialist reasons for doing so.

Despite such affirmations, however, most activists conceded when questioned that they wouldn't have joined the movement if they didn't have any real hope of political success. When the researchers asked activists what gives them hope, the majority felt that being part of a movement with others genuinely committed to doing something about this otherwise hopeless problem was most significant.

Most interviewees gained their hope from social connectivity and the power of the movement. Ben (2009b) stated, 'how much hope you have comes and goes, and it comes and goes with the movement.' This was perhaps one of the clearest statements of the centrality of mobilisation, and was reflected in many other comments from the interviewees. Clair also found great strength in the movement: 'I think being involved in campaigning and activism in itself gives hope; and being surrounded by and working with other people who are really dedicated to creating a better world. That inspires me with hope constantly'...For Margo, involvement in the movement was quite simply 'good for my soul', and I do draw great strength from that (Margo, 2008a). (Ibid, 102-103)

In heart, mind, and deed, one perceives in many of these activists living expressions of faith in Tillich's sense as "ultimate concern." Yet, sustaining this ultimate concern over the long term arguably requires not just a blind leap but something tangible that one can leap *to*. That is, for hope to become fully embodied, not just a faith that "believes" but a faith that is *confirmed* in the tangible world seems needed—perhaps in the form of growing public support, concrete political gains, and other reassurances that the movement isn't just spinning its own wheels. Without confirmation felt via personal or collective experience, interpersonal dialogue, etc., it's reasonable to suppose that hope will eventually exhaust itself. Indeed, "burn out" is certainly not uncommon with radical activists once the steep material realities of the struggle overcome the luster of hope they started with. As the big-picture challenges of the task at hand become increasingly

visible, for instance, it becomes easier to see one's personal energies as an inconsequential drop in this oceanic problem or see the movement they belong to as a stranded chunk of sandstone ceaselessly pounded by crashing waves. In any case, perhaps the dissolution of radical movements like the climate camps after a period of intense activity signals the limits of this "ultimate" faith as an end in itself.

On the other hand, maybe the hope inspiring many of these activists was too dependent on the movement (and thus enclosed by it). As one activist stated, "I believe in the movement, the movement, the movement. Because what else is there? (William 2009)" (Ibid, 103). Perhaps the movement should be an *expression* of hope, not just the reason for hope. In the face of a monumental and abstract problem like systemic climate change where tangible confirmation cannot be reasonably counted on to reinforce the movement from without, it would seem that resilient hopes for a better future require more than political involvement alone. To be truly sustainable, hope must have deeper roots in the cultural soils of meaning and vision to withstand the inevitable setbacks of climate action that are sure to confront activists with one disappointment after another. In the end, neither steadfast ethical duties to stick to the problem nor tendencies to vest all hope in movement confirmation alone seem sufficient.

Cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally, therefore, the problem-driven stance of the climate camps might have survived and even flourished had it created more space for the solution-driven motives expressed in the positive vision logic of political intentionality. If ethical anxiety without meaningful hope threatens denial and political impotence (beyond, say, unproductive outbursts of moral outrage or Braveheart moments of charging enemy fortresses only to hit a wall), lifeworld structures of cultural meaning

are needed to help bear the material and historical weight of this systemic issue. That is, *conceptions* of, *feelings* about, and *practical* responses to the climate problem have to find meaningful traction with traditional lifeworld assumptions operative or latent in the background (e.g., the “unfinished business” of social justice and world peace, religious virtues of respect and humility, romantic relations to nature, etc.<sup>107</sup>). To the extent possible, therefore, lifeworld communities must cultivate hope first from where they stand socio-culturally by figuring out how make sense of the climate problem in terms of meaningful “solutions,” and do so with enough historical depth to inspire their realization in practice.<sup>108</sup> Authentic hope requires carving paths from “here” to “there” on the socio-cultural landscape of common sensibilities and transcendent possibilities, and the mission statements and political strategies that define radical climate movements must learn to move adeptly along these paths.

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<sup>107</sup> Keep in mind that, however relevant cultural assumptions like these might be to the climate situation in some sense or another, they might nevertheless be historically implicated in problematic tendencies that would have to be carefully worked out (not uncritically adopted). Despite good intentions, for example, romantic conceptions of organic/original relations to nature that explicitly idealize the “noble savage” (as a counterweight to the corruptions of industrial civilization) have long served to implicitly dehumanizing indigenous peoples. As Kyle P. Whyte (2018) argues, unexamined cultural assumptions like these by white climate activists that see themselves as allies in indigenous struggles (as in the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline) can compromise efforts to build genuine and effective coalitions despite their intentions. Christian virtues of humility and respect, to take another example, might prove disempowering or counterproductive in some contexts if taken too far as ends in themselves (or intrinsically nobler than others). In political situations where practical consequences matter, certain religious virtues might have to give way to virtues better supported by other traditions like secular humanism that can empower self-efficacy and steadfast action (such as courage, pride, critical thinking, etc.).

<sup>108</sup> I preface this claim with “to the extent possible” because it cannot be assumed that every lifeworld community can adequately prepare itself (from where it stands) to respond to the climate problem effectively. To take an extreme but not uncommon example, certain conservative/fundamentalist Christian and Islamic sects with an eschatological penchant for apocalyptic rapture might be too far removed from climate change as a *problem*. Far from encouraging these lifeworld communities to dig deep and find meaningful avenues of response, climate change might be taken as the sign of human redemption that they’ve been waiting for. Even in less extreme cases (as with those expressing clear psychological tendencies toward “system-justification” or “social dominance orientation”), many are unlikely to come to terms with climate change as a meaningful problem from where they stand.

Critically, however, they must do so without being afraid to improvise and even take considerable detours when the contingencies of political involvement call for serious reevaluation. Again, political consequences matter in addition to the “durable motive” of ethical action precisely to the extent that hope must be confirmed in practice to survive. Hence, hopeful expressions of involvement must focus on what people *can* do (considering social capabilities, what seems politically viable, etc.), not just what they (ethically) *must* do. Can people be expected to simply reject consumerism wholesale or stop working to join the movement? For some in privileged positions seeking meaning in their lives, maybe so.<sup>109</sup> But not for others.<sup>110</sup>

If the climate camp movement tended to embody the hard medicine logic of ethical responsibility, the pragmatic stance of “institutionalized environmentalism” discussed in the second chapter embodied a liberal version of the positive vision logic of

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<sup>109</sup> As Kent (2016) makes clear, most of the CAG activists in her study come from very privileged backgrounds. Many had social/political connections and the leisure time to get involved (retired, economically secure empty-nesters, for instance).

<sup>110</sup> So perhaps when judging what is most ethically valuable, laudatory, virtuous, and ultimately *responsible*, what counts most shouldn't be measured exclusively by one's “authentic” proximity to the climate issue (by whatever metric), since by accident of birth and circumstance this is far easier for some than others. It's not just the position one *begins* with and *currently* has that counts most, but more importantly the *distance traveled* in one's personal and collective journey—as they take up and perhaps transcend the socio-cultural situation they were originally thrown into in response to issues like climate change that truly matter. Ethically evaluating instances of climate responsibility from an existentialist perspective, then, there must be ways of evaluating those born into circumstances anathema to climate responsibility but nevertheless overcome climate “denial” (in some meaningful way) *more highly* than those who managed to get to a similar point of action but were thrown into a world that made this journey easier to accomplish. Consider as instances of the former those born into politically or religiously conservative cultures, or into fossil-fuel-dependent local economies like those in Oklahoma or West Virginia, or into oppressive social conditions or abusive families where surviving outweighs thriving. For those that came of age under these circumstances, we might very well deem them more praiseworthy “simply” for getting to a point of acknowledgement and trying in earnest to find ways of openly talking about (processing) this issue with others from a similar background (knowing full well the challenges involved) than the indefatigable climate activist committed to organizing direct action campaigns for years on end. If the latter—this living paradigm of climate responsibility—was in fact thrown into a world that encouraged and supported their journey all the way through, it may be the case that the examples of transcendence accomplished by the former more closely embody what Joseph Campbell termed the “hero's journey,” and this should be considered when evaluating virtue and climate responsibility.

political intentionality. Furthermore, insofar as the climate camps invested most of their passions in climate reality (and ultimately couldn't sustain a hope that didn't reach much deeper than the movement they belonged to), it could be said that the mainstream climate movement seem to invest their hopes—albeit quite sustainably, it should be noted—far too deeply in the socio-cultural system they identified with. If their optimism was indeed felt more strongly than any anxieties about the problem, this was arguably reflected in their conception of the climate issue. Their interpretation is an enabling one, and in the political arena at least, considerable successes were pro-actively won as a result of their efforts (like getting the climate issue on the political map). Yet, by interpreting the climate problem through the myopic lens of politically achievable solutions, the systemic roots of climate change were glossed over in favor of the low-hanging fruit of small steps—and ultimately in favor of the technocratic approach favoring their powerful partners. Hence, although the “Big Green” climate movement was far more *politically* successful in implementing strategies for tangible results than their more ethically-minded counterparts in the climate camps, their strategies were consistently co-opted, and their missions ultimately thwarted by the regime they partnered with.

More radical proponents of the positive vision perspective wouldn't favor the top-down approach of pragmatically working with the regime (rather than challenging it). Again, however, the same logic of political intentionality holds. The bottom-up, radical democratic version of this logic suggests that effectively politicizing the grassroots requires an essential respect for cultural diversity beginning with where people stand (historically, politically). This involves respecting different ways of understanding climate change and giving different communities the space they need to openly envision

the kind of hopeful future essential to inspiring meaningful political involvement. Yet, without an ethical grounding in the climate problem for what it is,<sup>111</sup> the politics of difference is vulnerable to being settled by power. As evidenced by the surge of right-wing attacks on the political and cultural validity of science,<sup>112</sup> tendencies to neutralize questions of truth and reality serve the fossil fuel regime responsible for climate change and firmly vested in thwarting and co-opting radical movements to halt it. All things considered, celebrations of polycentrism and agonism that conflate the politics of cultural difference with promises of anxiety-relief in the face of nature aren't conducive to cultivating ethical identities with a steady grasp of systemic climate change as a material problem. In the end, adopting this one-sided political logic of climate response risks reinforcing, not challenging, regime hegemony.

Imaginarities of hope for a better world must therefore be authentically grounded in (but not reducible to) the climate problem for what it is, which will likely require varying degrees of affective struggle with the anxieties appropriate to the gravity of this problem. To this extent, moreover, respect for cultural differences in the way people understand the meaning of climate change cannot take precedence over reasonably-established scientific facts for the sake of preserving on principle a plurality of lifeworld identities. Largely hinging on structures of institutionalized power, the lifeworld continuity defining various cultural identities will need to be challenged to some degree or other by the

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<sup>111</sup> Which, again, entails (but doesn't rest on) cognitively, affectively, and politically engaging questions of truth about human and nonhuman reality.

<sup>112</sup> This "surge," originating predominantly in the Republican Party in the United States. It is not new or specific to the climate issue, but arguably coincident with the emergence of neoliberalism in partnership with the rise of the religious right in the 1980s. In 1998, Todd Wilkinson (1998) published *Science Under Siege* to document this tendency largely from a conservationist perspective.

material realities of the climate problem. To the extent that climate change signals a socio-ecological breakdown or “metabolic rift” (Foster 1999; Foster, Clark, and York 2010) in human relations to nature on a geophysical scale under industrial capitalism, it is indeed a problem common to all, even if the causes and effects of this phenomenon aren’t evenly distributed. Importantly, envisioning—or making political sense of—‘solutions’ to this problem certainly shouldn’t come at the *expense* of cultural difference (the danger of a unilateral top-down approach). But particularly for those living in industrialized societies, traditional assumptions and lifestyles (socio-cultural assumptions of human dominion, consumerism, nationalism, patriarchy, etc.) will likely have to be challenged in various ways and in varying degrees. With respect to political strategy in particular, movements must work—from within and from without—towards solutions responsive to the real problem by learning to effectively process the existential anxieties appropriate to ethical reflection and dialogue on this issue.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter turns to the quandary of transition as a conflict in logic between the ethical demands of a problem-driven response to the climate situation and the political demands of a solution-driven response. My thesis here is that this conflict largely expresses existential realities of the climate situation to the extent that any meaningful bridge *intersubjectively mediating* problem and solution, question and answer, ethics and politics, nature and history, etc., has yet to sufficiently form. With no common ground to stand on, and indeed with the very notion of a “common ground” thrown deeply into question (for valid if not entirely sound reasons), construction plans to enable passage

across the abyss cannot get very far. For those that intuit this condition, it may seem like the only viable path forward is to choose sides and, if pushed, dig in and stay there.

Absent a dia-logic of transition with common appeal, the only existential “response” to the climate situation is to react—cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally.

At their monological extremes, this historically-situated reaction finds philosophical coherence and expression in the hard medicine logic of ethical responsibility and the positive vision logic of political intentionality—where the former represents a problem-driven orientation and the latter a solution-driven stance. Whether strategies for motivating climate involvement are liberal or radical in expression, or reformist or revolutionary, there is a considerable degree of cognitive-affective-behavioral consistency within the hard medicine and positive vision perspectives, but not between them. This essentially reductive state of affairs embodies a logic of dualism in Plumwood and Beauvoir’s sense with far-reaching implications. But in addition to registering the structural logic of dualism as a relation of dependency (that cuts across social and socio-ecological relations), dualism has to be grasped in an existential—not just a conceptual, cognitive, or academic—sense. Dewey had it right when he spoke of dualism more broadly as a *condition*, as “an impasse in life; an impotence in interaction, inability to make effective transition, limitation of power to regulate and *thereby* to understand.”<sup>113</sup> Indeed, when I speak of the political quandary of *transition*, this is precisely what I am gesturing towards in anticipation of the following chapter.

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<sup>113</sup> I italicize the word “thereby” to draw attention to Dewey’s language. It suggests a secondary role for cognition to the extent that “understanding” is an *expression* of something deeper that is lived in experience. He writes, for instance, that tendencies to equate experience to “subjective private consciousness set over against nature...has wrought havoc in philosophy” since the seventeenth century (Dewey 1958, 11). In this respect, he is in good company with the major phenomenologists, existentialists, and historical materialists in the Continental tradition committed to challenging the primacy of the cognitive subject.

As I have argued, however, the historical task of responding to the paradoxical logic of the climate situation we all find ourselves in (in ways both universal and differentiated) require these positions find *common yet irreducible* expression to fully and adequately motivate collective action. As one-sided positions in logical conflict with one another, the limitations of each call for the virtues of the other. Cognition, affectivity, and behavior must somehow be problem-driven *and* solution-driven in comprehension, depending on the nature and contingencies of the situation calling for response.<sup>114</sup> Invoking Plumwood, the “monological” voices of ethical responsibility and political intentionality must become “dialogical.” The intransigent situation we find ourselves in today must become transitional to move forward in ways that are meaningful because they are realistic and realistic because they are meaningful. This can only occur via lifeworld experience—and specifically *critical* experience.

And yet, the reductive tendencies articulated in this chapter between the problem narrative and solution narrative on either side of the abyss only serve to introduce the political quandary of transition (just as the structural analysis in chapter two serves to outlined the contours of the ethical quandary of denial before taking it up phenomenologically in the chapter following it). Adequately taking up the political quandary of transition demands a philosophical framework that can irreducibly relate

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<sup>114</sup>Some situations and purposes might weigh more strongly in the direction of a problem-driven response while others lean in the other direction. That is, some situations might foreground the problem of climate change while leaving the question of solving it in the background, or vice-versa. For example, those in the early stages of making sense of the science and implications of climate change may initially find themselves problem-driven in orientation before turning attention to what can and should be done about this problem (yet, any focus on the problem always takes place against a background of latent assumptions and questions concerning pathways forward that *take up* the problem in the first instance). Likewise, in reverse, people (artists, scholars, activists, etc.) that have *already* gotten to a point of action might be in a position to leave the climate problem in the background while they focus more explicitly on innovating meaningful pathways forward or strategizing to realize alternative visions of the future in practice.

problem and solution, question and answer, in the fullest possible scope of the climate situation. In the final chapter that follows, I submit in this broader context that a critical phenomenology of climate response might serve to open up possibilities for a more deeply motivated, resilient, and durably committed climate justice movement moving forward. Needed, I argue, is what Merleau-Ponty calls a “thinkable politics” informed by a profoundly dialogical ontology of climate agency capable of bringing what I have called problem-driven and solution-driven motives into existential relation. From the dialectical/dialogical vantage point of what Merleau-Ponty has called “the relation of motivation,” we find valuable entry to the paradoxical logic of climate response. Because, somehow, collective action must be “externally motivated” by the ethical weight of the climate problem for what it is while simultaneously cultivating new horizons of possibility and hope that are “internally motivating” enough to inspire political solutions. Movements that learn to embody this double-sided “relation of motivation” must be ethically powerful enough to put regimes on the defensive and politically powerful enough to realize systemic transition on an historic scale.

## CHAPTER V

### CLIMATE CHANGE HAS NOT YET TAKEN PLACE:

#### MERLEAU-PONTY'S CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF TRANSITION

##### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I argue that overcoming the socio-cultural barriers to collective action on climate change requires not just an existential but a *critical* phenomenology. This takes us from Husserl and Heidegger to the most politically-oriented of the major phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty. Throughout the dissertation I have drawn on perspectives in phenomenology, existentialism, and historical materialism in an effort to bring coherence to the profound complexities and ambiguities of the climate situation. Merleau-Ponty offers a unique and powerful synthesis of all three traditions that affords a comprehensive account of collective motivation appropriate to the paradoxical logic of climate response outlined in the previous chapters. I draw on his political philosophy as a critical phenomenology<sup>115</sup> to dialogically mediate the existential abyss rendering the

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<sup>115</sup> This term is discussed near the end of this introduction where I link it to a phenomenology of class consciousness to emphasize important connections to historical materialism. As Fred Dallmayr (1981, 2) introduces the concept, critical phenomenology cross-pollinates “phenomenology and particularly the French version of ‘existential phenomenology’” with “critical (or nonorthodox) Marxism.” Indeed, Merleau-Ponty seems well placed at this cross-junction, and it is probably no accident that many politically-oriented philosophers drawn to this synthesis have backgrounds in his contributions to political thought (including Enzo Paci, Hugh Silverman, and Herbert G. Reid). In *The Emergence of Dialectical Theory*, Scott Warren (1984, 80) writes: “Maurice Merleau-Ponty is one of the most dialectical, open, and exciting interpretations of the problems posed by marxism in our time, and it forms the strongest impetus for the union of marxism and phenomenology in dialectical theory.” Nevertheless, it should be noted that, although John O’Neill (1972) asked “Can Phenomenology be Critical” nearly half a century ago and Dallmayr (1981) devoted a book entitled *Beyond Dogma and Despair: Toward a Critical Phenomenology of Politics* a decade later, this term hasn’t exactly caught on (although “Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology” was recently launched). Unfortunately, with few notable exceptions like Herbert Marcuse’s (1969) attempt to fuse Heidegger with the early Marx in 1928 in his “Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism,” projects to synthesize phenomenology with Marxism haven’t been widely taken up. This lack of interest may have been influenced by strong attitudes in the first generation of the Frankfurt School against Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre—and thus Merleau-Ponty by association.

climate situation impervious to response, as represented by the monological conflict between hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism.

I suspect Merleau-Ponty would affirm the kernels of truth driving the hard medicine and positive vision perspectives, but reject the one-sided logic setting these positions in mutual conflict. In his own day, he acknowledged and criticized similar tendencies dividing Marxist thought into “Orthodox” and “Western” camps with respect to motivating the Proletarian revolution. Despite their virtues, he concluded that the logic of each stance misses the “relation of motivation” essential to politicizing collective action, and I submit that this basic point applies to the hard medicine and positive vision positions as well (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 473). Indeed, my introduction of the quandary of transition in the previous chapter (as symptomatic of dualism or monological conflict) is politically reformulated and expanded in this chapter beginning with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the situation within which lived experience finds expression as a relation of motivation.

The situation within which *political action* finds expression is historical in context and meaning, and in fact “all motivations intersect at the center of history” in the final analysis (Ibid, 177). Specifically, an existential politics of collective action must be significantly oriented by intersubjective *perceptions* of history. Perception, whether in response to the individual’s situation or the historical situation appropriate to political action, is two-fold in motivation with respect to the “perceived” and the “perceiver.” On the one hand, perception is *motivated* by the givens perceived in the “situation as fact” (Miller 1979, 212). Here we might find solid grounds for hard medicine affirmations of ethical responsibility. But this is only the half of it because perception also expresses the

lifeworld logic of the perceiver intentionally *motivating* the “situation as undertaken,” which speaks to their positive vision counterparts (Ibid).<sup>116</sup> Similarly, politics is both motivated by the *historical situation as fact* which includes all of the unpredictable contingencies that emerge in political life, together with the political intentions or collective projects motivating the *historical situation as undertaken*. Understanding what motivates perception is therefore key to understanding what motivates history and politics alike. Whether political action commits itself to the proletarian revolution or climate justice, grassroots movements for systemic change must learn to perceive and handle historic relations of motivation productively.

To the extent that movements must somehow be historically situated by the material realities of the climate situation while working out visionary ways of meaningfully transcending it, they require what Merleau-Ponty has called a “thinkable politics” to fully motivate collective action.<sup>117</sup> This term refers to Merleau-Ponty’s first of many political essays written in 1945 entitled “The War Has Taken Place.” This essay arguably captures what is most essential to his political philosophy, and in some respects the present chapter as well. It opens as follows:

Events kept making it less and less probable that peace could be maintained. How could we have waited so long to go to war?...The reason was that we were not guided by the facts. We had secretly resolved to know nothing of violence and unhappiness as elements of history because we were living in a country too weak to envisage them...We knew that concentration camps existed, that the Jews were being persecuted, but these certainties belonged to the world of thought. We were not as yet

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<sup>116</sup> The terms “*motivated*” and “*motivating*” are central to this chapter’s philosophical aims and are consistently employed throughout to rigorously distinguish these facets of motivation.

<sup>117</sup> Strictly speaking, the term “thinkable politics” comes from Kerry Whiteside’s reading of Merleau-Ponty. It refers to a passage (reproduced below) in Merleau-Ponty’s seminal political essay “The War Has Taken Place” that reads: “Before the war, politics seemed unthinkable to us.” Citing this passage, Whiteside (1988, 3) goes on to suggest: “Making politics ‘thinkable’ was the most urgent problem facing postwar philosophy.”

living face to face with cruelty and death: we had not as yet been given the choice of submitting to them or confronting them. (Merleau-Ponty 1964c, 139)

Expressed here is a discontent with the “optimistic philosophy” of pre-war France that “reduced human society to a sum of consciousnesses always ready for peace and happiness” (Ibid, 139). Facts that interfered with this liberal disposition didn’t register. It took a war, and indeed being an occupied people in the thick of it, before the French felt concretely *situated* in a world beyond their immediate grasp and influence. Thus, Merleau-Ponty explains, the kind of politics needed to respond to the signs of pre-war build-up were unimaginable before the war had “taken place.”

Before the war, politics seemed unthinkable to us...Politics is impossible from the perspective of consciousness. But the moment came when our innermost being felt the impact of these external absurdities. We have been led to take upon ourselves not only our intentions—what our actions mean for us—but also the external consequences of our actions, what they mean in an historical context. (Ibid, 145)

One could say with good reason that the most pressing “external absurdity” confronting us today is climate change. It isn’t difficult to apply his descriptions of prewar France to the climate situation today where so many people know “the facts” in some sense but aren’t guided by them because “these certainties belonged to the world of thought” (Ibid, 139). Many of us therefore find ourselves in the curious and paradoxical situation discussed in previous chapters. We are indeed living with climate change today with each super storm, drought, wildfire, and “sunny day flood” that we hear about and even personally encounter. Yet, I submit that climate change has not yet “taken place” in our everyday lives such that we collectively experience the totalizing implications of the situation at hand in “our innermost being.” A thinkable politics requires being perceptively attuned to the contingencies of the political situation, which ultimately

means bringing our pre-reflective lifeworld intentions into dialogue with the historical and material realities of the situation where the consequences of intentional action matter.

Compared to the political situation of prewar France, however, a thinkable politics responsive to the climate situation must be sweeping indeed. Ultimately, historical relations of motivation must shift politically in the form of systemic transition. But these relations are always embodied in the background of lifeworld existence. Hence, shifting the socio-cultural relations motivating the systemic inertia of history would involve shifting an entire matrix of lived relations motivating lifeworld perception, consciousness, language, rationality, affectivity, practical behavior—or in a word, our *intentional* relation to the world. The problem is that such a sweeping lifeworld transition only occurs once enough people collectively experience the true weight of their historical and material situation. Hence, before existing generations find themselves sufficiently compelled to critically work through the socio-cultural matrix of motivational relations concealed deep in the background, they would have to become situated by the climate issue just as deeply. There isn't, in my view, anything like the Pearl Harbor attack that situated the U.S. public in the second world war. Following Franklin Roosevelt's "Infamy Speech" the next day, it must have felt like the weight of history had descended as the economy was being reorganized and collective action mobilized on a mass scale.

Arguably, therefore, the need for a "thinkable politics" perceptively attuned to the meaning and contingency of political matters is more pertinent to the climate situation today than it was for the war situation of Merleau-Ponty's generation. For one thing, recall the point in the second chapter made by Dryzek, *et al.* that the system of institutions developed over the past couple of centuries are adapted to handling collective

action problems pertaining to war (as well as the economy and welfare), but not climate change. More to the point, the abstract logic and lifeworld conflicts defining the climate situation don't readily afford clear solutions to the problem or clear answers to questions about it. Following my thesis that climate change has not yet "taken place" in an existential sense (and, indeed, that we cannot wait for a singular event that unambiguously points the way forward), I argue that the critical task of a thinkable politics of climate response is to come to terms with the fact that becoming situated *by* the climate issue requires situating *ourselves* to it moving forward, and vice-versa. Merleau-Ponty would agree that any thinkable politics has to learn to traverse the situated and the situating, the motivated and the motivating, but the political quandary of climate transition signals just how difficult this is.

At this point, not just the abstract but *paradoxical* logic of the climate situation starts coming into view. I've suggested that activists and the citizens supporting them need to be "situated" by the climate problem, as if passively from without, before the hard realities of this problem can sink in. And yet, I also claim in reverse that experiencing the true weight of historical and material passivity—as the climate situation finally takes place in the existential marrow of everyday life—entails something like an active, intentional effort from within. Being affected by the climate situation requires affecting it, and vice-versa. That is, we must be extrinsically motivated by the hard implications of this problem by intrinsically motivating our own visionary response to it, and back again—until the motives on each side of the climate situation come into dialogical relation and this issue finally "takes place" in the existential marrow of socio-cultural life.

Crucially, therefore, a thinkable politics for climate justice cannot assume that people need the hard medicine discipline to bear this weight before feeling motivated, and neither does it rest on the proposition that motivating a collective response hinges on creating cultural visions of positive change. Rather, it begins with the paradox that being *motivated* by the climate “situation as fact” means *motivating* the climate “situation as undertaken” and back again in a reflexive, dialectical exchange. And more importantly, it recognizes that bringing these phenomenologically distinct motives into productive relation begins with a capacity to collectively experience the profound ambiguities or “external absurdities” that, as I suggest in chapter four, define what is most essential to the climate situation. Turning to the language of dialogue, it can be said that the dialectics of transition begin once collectives come to embody the lived fact that they don’t have the answers and solutions ahead of time, and that they don’t even know exactly which questions to ask or what the basic problem really is in the first place. But as I’ve also emphasized, becoming situated by contingent (and thus still ambiguous) problems and questions already presupposes some capacity to intentionally engage them under a horizon of possible solutions and answers. When problems aren’t quite ready to be solved but are still present enough to be vaguely perceived in the background, and when solutions don’t yet answer problems but are nevertheless felt strongly enough to bring these problems more deeply into question, climate change will have finally taken place in that ambiguous space that sets lifeworld dialogue in motion. And once this paradoxical, boundary-transgressing movement from sense to non-sense and back again takes hold in the background of experience, the dialectics of lifeworld motivation work their magic

until that decisive gestalt shift occurs when how we collectively think, feel, and respond to situations find new comprehension.

Of course, learning to dialogically mediate and traverse these lifeworld relations of motivation on the “problem” and “solution” side of the climate abyss doesn’t guarantee systemic transition, just as raising class consciousness doesn’t make class liberation inevitable. The only thing class/climate consciousness does is help clear space for future possibilities by exchanging the false clarity and security promised by monological consistency for the weighty ambiguities of the contingent situation. Considering Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the monological conflict between Orthodox and Western Marxists, it might be said that lifeworld ambiguity is what keeps the dialectic of historical change and ultimately systemic transition alive with possibility. So if the work of bridging the abyss between question and answer—problem and solution, ethics and politics, etc.—begins with the lived experience of ambiguity as a prerequisite condition to bringing these motives into a relation, the critical question of climate response hinges on how to collectively cultivate this productively. It is precisely with this question that my focus shifts from existential phenomenology to critical phenomenology.

Indeed, my reference above to class consciousness above isn’t merely incidental. Marx’s historical materialism had a profound influence on Merleau-Ponty’s political thought (and possibly the dialectical logic of his phenomenology more generally<sup>118</sup>), and

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<sup>118</sup> The most explicit case for this interpretation that I’m aware of comes from Douglas Low’s (1987) *The Existential Dialectic of Marx and Merleau-Ponty*, where he traces the philosophical parallels between Marx’s early philosophical works and Merleau-Ponty’s (1963) first book *The Structure of Behavior*. This out-of-print book is valuable to the extent that Merleau-Ponty scholarship (in the anglophone world, at least) overwhelmingly treats his relation to Marx as political rather than philosophical in inspiration. For Low, what both thinkers share in common is an “existential dialectic.” Considering Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, I would add that each articulates a unique ontology that could be called embodied materialism. In the 1844 *Manuscripts*, Marx (1988, 111) appears to sketch an ontology of labor (conceived as a practical

the dialectics of class consciousness run throughout the latter's political books and essays. In the context of describing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reading of Marxian philosophy, Kerry Whiteside (1988, 98) writes: "The theory of the awakening of class consciousness is a critical theory in the sense meant by the Frankfurt School." So in the context of this chapter, what is "phenomenological" in Merleau-Ponty's critical phenomenology concerns coming to terms with the paradoxical relations of motivation in the lifeworld background vis-à-vis the climate situation. And what is "critical" in his critical phenomenology speaks more specifically to the practical task of bringing these concealed relations of motivation to lived, conscious expression in the form of a thinkable politics of climate response. It's worth noting, however, that although the language of class/climate consciousness and a thinkable politics are used in this chapter, my reading of Merleau-Ponty's critical phenomenology doesn't center on the "consciousness" of the "thinking" agent. To guard against the cognitivist underpinnings of Western thought questioned through this dissertation, I should be clear that what eventually becomes "thinkable" in a thinkable politics or what one becomes "conscious"

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involvement or way of being the world) grounded in the sensuous body, where "sens-perception [takes] the two-fold form both of *sensuous* consciousness and *sensuous* need." From this premise, he hopes to capture the dialectics of history and nature as an embodied, sensuous, practical relation that intertwines intentional activity and passivity: "It will be seen how subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and suffering, only lose their antithetical character...in the social condition; it will be seen how the resolution of the *theoretical* antitheses is *only* possible in a *practical* way, by virtue of the practical energy of man" (Ibid, 109). Preceding his discussion of "species being" later in the *Manuscripts* where "[h]istory is the true natural history of Man" (Ibid, 156), he writes: "*Man* is directly a *natural* being...he is on the one hand furnished with *natural powers of life*—he is an *active* natural being. These forces exist in him as tendencies and abilities—as *impulses*. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a *suffering*, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants. That is to say, the *objects* of his impulses exist independent of him; yet these are objects of his *need*—essential *objects*, indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers...[which is to say] that he can only *express* his life in real, sensuous objects...Man as an objective, sensuous being is therefore a *suffering* being—and because he feels what he suffers, a *passionate* being" (Ibid, 155-156). All things considered, as Low (1987, 4) argues, "there is a striking similarity between Marx's view and Merleau-Ponty's philosophical position, a position that Merleau-Ponty develops in great detail and well beyond Marx's writings."

of in class/climate consciousness is primordially *embodied* in the background of lifeworld existence. As Aristotle (1925, 45-47) explains in his discussion of moral virtue, what counts in the most challenging situations isn't one's capacity for rational thought but one's perception, and specifically being habituated to express the motives most appropriate to the situation. Prior to political consciousness and strategy, a critical phenomenology must look to embodied perception where ambiguity is meaningfully experienced and processed in the situated/situating face of contingency.

This chapter thus moves from Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of lifeworld motivation where embodied transitions in perception occur to his critical phenomenology where refigured relations of motivation can shift consciousness, political action, and at the culminating limit (and on the rarest occasions) the socio-cultural matrix of history itself. Ultimately, the task of a critical phenomenology of climate response is paradoxical in the same sense that, say, apathy expresses the deepest feelings or that one must have courage and fortitude to be vulnerable. Drawing attention to the lived paradoxes of existence, I argue that overcoming the existential problem—the political quandary of transition in conjunction with the ethical quandary of denial—requires a coherent movement of becoming “actively situated” by the hard realities of climate change for the sake of “passively situating” ourselves to visionary horizons of possibility moving forward. Indeed, as the structures of language and reason rub against their own limits of expression, a reflexive ability to pay close attention to the phenomena becomes essential to cultivating a thinkable politics of climate response. But this *a posteriori* capacity for reflexivity in action also requires an *a priori* logic that can effectively traverse the lines between passivity and activity, nature and history, the external object

and internal subject, etc. that have been hardened by the metaphysics of language and rationality. In Merleau-Ponty's hands, the dialectical tradition bequeathed by Hegel and Marx at their best is philosophically equipped to handle paradox, and it seems to me that nothing brings out the paradoxical logic of existence more forcefully and sweepingly than the climate situation.

And finally, if such a dialogical ontology of lifeworld transition is to be commensurate with the material conditions and historical scale of *systemic* transition, it has to find traction in positive visions of the future that are comprehensive enough to bring the systemic nature of the climate situation into sharp relief. This, I suggest, would serve the role of "passively situating" ourselves to the climate problem, and specifically to the problem of climate injustice. The theme of climate injustice is particularly powerful to the extent that it calls into question the totalizing lifeworld project of *dominion* discussed in chapter three that cuts across social and socio-ecological relations. Needed, then, are comprehensive ethico-political visions of climate justice that announce alternative forms of being in the social and socio-ecological world—and do so, moreover, in ways that are both specific to, and common across, differences in socio-cultural background. I thus conclude by drawing on Carolyn Merchant and Val Plumwood's visionary works under the rubric of "dialogical partnership" as a viable framework within which comprehensive visions of climate justice can take hold. Again, however, a critical phenomenology of climate response isn't intended to construct political bridges or prescribe new identities for the Anthropocene once and for all. It is meant to clear a space for the lived paradoxes of climate response where problem-driven motives for ethical

responsibility and solution-driven motives for political intentionality might finally achieve dialogical transition.

### ***Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology of Motivation***

In chapter three, I suggested that, for Husserl, the “noema” (the intersubjective meaning of things constituting the background of lifeworld relations) served as a kind of third term between object and subject, realism and idealism. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for his part, describes the body as a “third genre of being,” and this ontological genre implicates his notions of “institution” and “the flesh” as well. But with respect to the ethico-political quandaries of climate action, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological conception of *motivation* serves this philosophical role most appropriately. In my view, his phenomenology of motivation strikes at the heart of his unique contribution to philosophical thought in general and political thought in particular. But it’s also what makes his work uniquely suited to engaging the existential problem of climate response without reducing the daunting complexities and ambiguities of this challenge into internally-consistent sectors of thought and action (each of which rendered manageable from within precisely to the extent that they are incommunicable with one another from without).

Merleau-Ponty (2012, 50) introduces motivation as the phenomenological answer to “objective thought” which, he submits, “knows only dichotomies.” These dichotomies include mind and matter, subject and object, the for-itself and in-itself, history and nature, activity and passivity, and so on, where these categories are conceived as externally related to one another. In the context of his studies of perception and behavior, for

instance, he might focus on the dichotomy between “reason” and “cause.” In political contexts of collective action, the dichotomy to be overcome is often between the “meanings” and “consequences” of political action. And finally, when politics is addressed more broadly at the level of history, Merleau-Ponty tends to speak of the foreseeable “logic” of historical continuity and the unforeseen “contingencies” that disrupt and animate it. In any case, he writes: “Objective thought cannot assimilate these phenomena, and this is why [it]...can only choose between reason and cause...On the contrary, the phenomenological notion of *motivation* is one of those ‘fluid’ concepts that must be formulated if we want to return to phenomena” (Ibid, 51). Again, this speaks to the phenomenological task of a critical phenomenology.

In calling motivation a “fluid” concept, he is indeed suggesting that it serves as a third term of mediation between the bipolar categories mentioned earlier. There is a consistent thread running throughout Merleau-Ponty’s various phenomenological studies premised on what might be called an existential dialectic of relationality. If the categories of “objective thought” are treated independently of each other, and thus externally related, dialectical thought attempts to consider each category in terms of the other by focusing on the dynamic relations between them (through some medium like the body or the institution). Early in his career, he sometimes spoke of an “internal relationship” to describe the logic of dialectics (as some Marxists do<sup>119</sup>). But the primary goal was to conceive the forces that bring these categories together with those that hold them in tension or conflict. This is precisely why a “fluid” term of mediation is needed.

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<sup>119</sup> Perhaps the most explicit proponent of reading Marx’s theory of dialectics as a philosophy of internal relations comes from Bertell Ollman. See *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method* (Ollman 2003).

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical conception of motivation largely traces back to his early encounters with Gestalt theory. The principle insight here is that behavior and perception express a certain "structure" between organism and environment, or perceiver and perceived. The basic unit of analysis for this is the figure/ground (part/whole) relation. If, for instance, mechanistic and atomistic accounts of empiricism assume that the whole is merely the sum-total of its constituent parts, the holistic account of the early Gestalt theorists argued that the parts are organically related via the whole. For instance, a given thing (figure) only stands out as intelligible against the whole (ground) that constitutes it. Taking an example mentioned in chapter three, the two-dimensional drawing of the vertices of a cube is naturally perceived in three dimensions because the figure of a "cube" is intrinsically constituted by the self-organizing structures of consciousness (the "noema"). Empiricists cannot account for this.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, however, Merleau-Ponty rejects the "intellectualist" premise of a constituting consciousness and goes on to note that Gestalt theorists didn't have the philosophical framework needed to account for their own discoveries.<sup>120</sup> As he puts it, when confronted with the difficulties of explaining the mind's constituting logic ("reason"), many fell back on causal explanations in which background structures of consciousness were said to "cause" the figure. Falling victim to "objective thought," he continues, Gestalt theorists "can only choose between reason and

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<sup>120</sup> Merleau-Ponty would later come to criticize his work in *Phenomenology* for not fully overcoming this intellectualist premise, and in response turned his attention to "institution" as a non-cognitivist alternative to "constitution." There is reason to argue in this context that this significantly motivated his philosophical turn to an ontology of the "the flesh" in his unfinished and posthumously published work *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968) and his political critique of "Western Marxism" (including the Marx of 1844) in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1973).

cause” (Ibid, 51). A return to the phenomena, he argues in contradistinction, would suggest that background structures *motivate* the figure of perception, and vice-versa.

In Merleau-Ponty’s hands, the structure of the figure/ground relation has to be understood as an open totality of meaning or “sense.” The French word *sens* implies both the meaning and direction of things, which for Merleau-Ponty means that the figure/ground structure of existence has a general orientation.<sup>121</sup> Importantly, *sens* is neither objective nor subjective, neither passively received as a sign (“centripetal”) nor actively created by consciousness as a signifier (“centrifugal”). Rather, the basic structure of *sens* embodies a “realism of relations” that is *lived* (Landes 2013, 61). Just as Marxists argue that the dichotomies of abstract theory—mind and matter, history and nature—can only be resolved in practice, the structure of relations for Merleau-Ponty has to be grasped as an expression of the “lived logic” of existence. “What is profound in the notion of ‘Gestalt’ from which we started is not the idea of signification but that of *structure*, the joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible, the contingent arrangement by which material begins to have meaning [*sens*] in our presence, intelligibility in the nascent state” (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 206-207).

Structures of *sens* have a coherence and orientation because they are norm-directed and are open and flexible in that they express a dialectical relationship between figure and ground (Toadvine 2009, 25). This is important because existence places two basic demands on life: it must be both consistently *reliable* in the face of a changing world and yet sufficiently *open* to respond to unexpected contingencies and thus adapt to

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<sup>121</sup> Recall, in this regard, the discussion in chapter three describing motivation as fundamentally oriented.

change when needed.<sup>122</sup> The first moment, in other words, speaks to the coherence, continuity, and inertia of existence afforded by a normative “ground,” while the second speaks to the dynamics of change that open existence *beyond* such norms by dialectically (rather than causally or intellectually) relating ground and figure. The normative and dialectical features that structure relationality, therefore, compose the basic existential framework within which the fluid concept of motivation finds expression.

Beginning with the “ground” of structures, a certain “style of existence” is recognizable thanks to the general norms that outline and orient life (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 120). They do so in the form of establishing general patterns of response to familiar situations. Whether speaking of nonhuman organisms, or human individuals or collectives, an ability to make sense of things coherently and consistently through time is essential to reliably securing the basic needs of life. Otherwise, each situation entered would have to be confronted as something entirely new and unfamiliar as if from scratch, and life is too complex and dynamic—contingent and ambiguous, Merleau-Ponty would say—to rely on either the external environment to be routinely consistent or on the intrinsic properties of an organism or consciousness to create its own consistency moment by moment. If the lived world is too contingent and ambiguous to afford a lock-and-key relation to it, a certain ground or *entry* is needed in advance to secure the initial traction needed to reliably cope with it.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, existence presupposes an *a priori* logic “motivating” behavior, perception, affect, speech, reason, freedom, politics, history, and other forms of

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<sup>122</sup> Considering this insight in the climate context, one might recall the tension discussed in chapter three between the existential imperative to maintain “ontological security” and the ethical imperative to “take responsibility.”

expression. The individual, collective, or organic<sup>123</sup> intentions motivating “the situation as undertaken” are always informed by an “anonymous” background of norms that we tacitly live by as intersubjective beings. Hence, one’s historical and natural background always already *predispose* them to handle things in certain ways and from a certain perspective. Here we might loosely associate the “motivating” side of motivation with the socio-cultural structures of existence analyzed in chapter three and the positive vision logic of political intentionality discussed in chapter four.

Importantly, however, these normative intentions only *generally prepare* one for the situation at hand. But the concrete situation as *experienced* always exceeds this general grasp to some extent in its material specificity. Outside of controlled settings (as developed for scientific experimentation, for example), no set of lifeworld norms and expectations could ever fully prepare one to successfully respond to every situation. Again, the material world is too complex, dynamic, and ambiguous to allow this.<sup>124</sup>

This is where dialectics become particularly important. Lifeworld existence certainly requires the intersubjective entry that comes with having a normative

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<sup>123</sup> By “organic,” I mean human and non-human bodies. See Merleau-Ponty’s (1963) *The Structure of Behavior* for his most comprehensive treatment of animality, and *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) for his account of human embodiment.

<sup>124</sup> One could speculate here that, not unlike controlled settings of the lab experiment, the increasingly “humanized” world following the industrial revolution has increasingly standardized lifeworld experience so that many have become progressively desensitized to the material contingencies of everyday life. Max Weber’s sociological diagnoses of the “rationalization” and “bureaucratization” of social life come to mind, but so do Native American thinkers that have studied the cultural depth of white society’s anthropocentric perceptions of the natural world. Vine Deloria Jr. (2001) and Chief Luther Standing Bear (1998), for instance, generally distinguish indigenous ways of being from those of white “civilization” by the former’s acute sensitivity or attunement to the dynamics of natural phenomena (exemplified by what some term “traditional ecological knowledge”). In the phenomenological language of motivation used in this chapter, we might wonder if industrialized alienation stems from building a disproportionately *motivating* world intended to constantly facilitate and reinforce instrumental relations to nature and others. Depending on context and with respect to power, we generally refer to this condition—where the ‘motivating’ inertia of one’s inaugurating perspective overwhelms the ‘motivated’ conditions of the situation exceeding it—as anthropocentric, ethnocentric, androcentric, etc.

perspective on things, but reflexivity or openness is required to successfully grasp the “things themselves.” This openness to what exceeds one’s initial grasp means that existence is not only “motivating” from within, so to speak, but also “motivated” from without by the material and historical givens of experience. Here we find ourselves called to respond to “the situation as fact,” which is precisely the side of motivation centering the hard medicine logic of ethical responsibility (as distinct from the “situation as undertaken” motivating lifeworld projects). The response to the given situation, therefore, has to be understood dialectically as a singular expression that is informed both by the encountered figure that motivated or called for a response, along with the general background structures of intentionality motivating it.

Perception, then, is a primary expression of what Merleau-Ponty has called in another context “the relation of motivation.” He writes: “To the extent that the *motivated* phenomenon [the figure] is brought about, its internal relation with the *motivating* phenomenon [in the background] appears, and rather than succeeding it, the motivated phenomenon makes the motivating one explicit and clarifies it, such that the motivated seems to have preexisted its own motive (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 51; italics added). Ultimately, there’s a dialectical relation between the response as “motivating” (thanks to the normative intentions orienting the perceiver’s initial entry), and the “motivated” contingencies of the *given* situation calling for clarification before they can be dealt with effectively. Although the normative “ground” of existence usually maintains a reliable continuity between organism and environment, self and world, past and future, etc., this background is nevertheless constantly subject to influence by the material contingencies

and events that exceed it. At no point is this background a *tabula rosa*, but this doesn't mean that the traces of material experience aren't thoroughly inscribed in experience.

Harking back to Husserl's treatment of noematic relations, the relative strength or weight of each motive depends on one's *relation* to the given situation. To the extent that the situation is sufficiently *familiar* thanks to past experience (personal and collective), the motivating inertia of background norms will tend to outweigh the motivated power of the concrete situation calling for a response. At the limit, background motives will seem to predetermine or *cause* the "figure" of experience, as if the things themselves had just one unambiguous meaning regardless of the situation. Exclusive attention to this phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty says, is the mistake of empiricists who, forgetting that familiarity with things is always normative and achieved over time, assume that experience begins with the (already determinate) "external" world, as passively received by the senses. But if, by contrast, the situation at hand is sufficiently *unfamiliar*, then the *motivated* force of the given situation will tend to carry more weight in one's response. When this occurs, as in the case of learning, it is the motivated figure that informs the motivating background structures of *sens*—so that the next situation of this type will be approached and taken up differently thanks to this transfigured background. From this angle, one might be impressed by the power of the mind (and culture) to "constitute" experience, as if meaning is superimposed on things according to the mind's *own* "logic." In this way, idealists (or "intellectualists," for Merleau-Ponty) make the opposite mistake of empiricists by missing the motived element offered by the things themselves.

In each case, empiricists and idealists misconstrue perception by failing to grasp the dialectical relation of motivation intertwining the perceiver and perceived. Perception

is at once *motivated* by the material givens perceived in “the situation as fact” and informed by the lifeworld logic of the perceiver *motivating* “the situation as undertaken.” If perception were unmotivated by the things themselves, it would merely be the hallucination of a pure mental or cultural projection. Yet, without a motivating background or *a priori* logic, perception would be entirely meaningless, inarticulate, and ultimately unintelligible with each encounter. But as a seamless expression of the two-fold nature of motivation, perception is both passively situated and curtailed by the givens of experience while at the same time actively striving to make sense of things meaningfully according to the lifeworld logic sedimented in the background of existence.

So instead of starting with either the completely unfamiliar where causation seems prior to normativity, or the completely familiar where normativity is salient, Merleau-Ponty begins with the embodied middle ground of perception or “third genre” intertwining these extremes. Offering a concrete example of this relation of motivation, he describes perceiving something just offshore that is too unfamiliar to be clearly intelligible but familiar enough to train one’s attention on it until it finally makes sense. Here, moreover, we see the significance of ambiguity (central to this chapter) at work.

If I am walking on a beach toward a boat that has run aground, and if the funnel or the mast merges with the forest that borders the dune, then there will be a moment in which these details suddenly reunite with the boat and become welded to it. As I approached, I did not perceive the resemblances or the proximities that were, in the end, about to reunite with the superstructure of the ship in an unbroken picture. I merely felt that the appearance of the object was about to change, that something was immanent in this tension, as the storm is immanent in the clouds. The spectacle was suddenly reorganized, satisfying my vague expectation. Afterward I recognized, as justifications for the change, the resemblance and contiguity of what I call “stimuli,” that is, the most determinate phenomena obtained from up close and with which I compose the “true” world. “How did I not see that these pieces of wood were part of the boat?” But these reasons, drawn from having properly perceived the boat, were not given as reasons prior to correct perception. The unity of the object is established upon the presentiment of an imminent order that will, suddenly, respond to questions that are merely latent in

the landscape. It will resolve a problem only posed in the form of a vague uneasiness... (Ibid, 17-18)

In this ambiguous situation, there is a discernable moment in which the familiar and the unfamiliar live in tension in a way that isn't commonly felt or consciously acknowledged. To begin with, we cannot in this example overlook the perceiver's initial familiarity with coastal landscapes in general. Motivating perception in the background, this is what enables Merleau-Ponty as an embodied perceiver to distinguish normality from abnormality, or sense from nonsense. It was against this background of normative expectations that he was able to initially recognize the object protruding from the ocean as something that was indeed *unfamiliar*. In other words, insofar as the figure wasn't passed over unnoticed but stood out against this background of familiarity, it motivated the curious perceiver to actively train his attention on it as a perceptual "problem" (perception is naturally motivated to make sense of non-sense). Hence, without a normative background *motivating* perception, the figure wouldn't have *motivated* the perceiver to actively question the landscape as a problem in need of resolution. We could add, moreover, that without prior familiarity with things called 'boats,' this tension couldn't have been resolved. The "unity of the object" as a sensible thing would have remained indeterminate and unintelligible, or else mistaken in a case of misperception for something resembling the mysterious object. The motivated figure of perception, therefore, needs the motivating traction structured by existing background norms in order for it be recognized or determined for what is.

Now if we compare this ambiguous experience to a highly normal or familiar situation, the motivating inertia of perception would be so strong that it's motivated counterpart would seem instantaneous, and thus likely to escape notice. Seagulls drifting

among the clouds in the distance, or the trees in the forest, aren't consciously studied or questioned thing by thing but seem to appear automatically as the sensible things that they are—and relegated to the background accordingly. Or if the object perceived had instead been a fully-functioning boat floating on the water like the countless others one has experienced in the past, its appearance on the land/seascape would also have been instantly motivated and not worth paying attention to. The perceiver in this case would be so well prepared for the answer (the sensible perception of the boat *as a boat*) that he wouldn't have enough time to even notice that the question “what is this?” was in fact asked (motivated) in that first instance. On other hand, imagine that one is familiar with boats but has little to no lifeworld experience with the spectacle of a shipwreck. In this highly unfamiliar situation, the question of what one was looking at might linger indefinitely or be misperceived—unless, perhaps, the perceiver put on scuba gear to take in and study the boat as a whole with his own senses to make the inference.

Ultimately, therefore, even highly familiar situations are still motivated *ex posteriori* by the perceived world itself, and highly unfamiliar situations still require the *a priori* normative traction motivating perceptual dialogue if sense is to eventually be made of nonsense. In the final analysis, the perceiver's situated relationship to the perceived is what determines the relative weights of the motivating and motivated elements of perception—but relations of motivation hold in every case.

To anticipate my argument from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, I argue that hard medicine and positive vision strategies to motivate public action on climate change both miss the essentially *relational* nature of motivation. The figure of climate change, I submit, is both familiar and unfamiliar—and, in this basic

respect, the climate situation is as ambiguous as Merleau-Ponty's hypothetical first contact with the shipwreck. With hard medicine realists, we need to be sufficiently motivated by the existential absurdity of climate change as a systemic problem in order to seriously question things. Again, answers cannot be discovered without first feeling "externally" situated by the problems that compel questions in the first place. And considering the positive vision stance, it's equally true that perceiving climate change as a problem or an absurdity to be questioned also requires meaningful avenues for answering it. Making sense of nonsense presupposes a cultural background of norms against which things, events, or issues stand out. Just as the shipwreck could only stand out conspicuously as questionable against the background sensibilities motivating everyday perception in the first instance, so too the "hard" figure of systemic climate change has to be brought into fluid dialogue with the "positive" socio-cultural norms motivating an intentional response to this absurdity with some measure of purpose and integrity. Hence, sensible answers not only presuppose sensible questions, but sensible questions presuppose the possibility of a sensible answer on the horizon—or a "vague expectation," as Merleau-Ponty put it in his description of the moments leading to perception, latent in the socio-cultural landscape of meaningful possibilities.

In this respect, the existential problem of public motivation (and the political quandary of transition in particular) finds sharpest relief in the need to collectively experience what we might call climate ambiguity. Prerequisite to successfully making ethical and political sense of our situation today is that "vague uneasiness" felt when the unfamiliar and the familiar, question and answer, live in existential tension. What Hubert Dreyfus described as a gestalt shift in the face of existential angst is directly analogous to

the experience of the shipwreck “suddenly reorganized” in the embodied dialogue between sense and nonsense described by Merleau-Ponty. Of course, in contrast to these personal situations, however, the political figure of systemic climate change is historically and materially situated on a much larger scale. Grappling with the political gestalt shift needed to motivate mass movements for climate justice requires coming to terms with the relations of motivation at play on the *historical* landscape of lifeworld existence. In what follows, we turn to Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of historical materialism, and his critical phenomenology of class consciousness in particular, as a paradigm example of how political gestalt shifts might occur.

### ***Historical Materialism and the Critical Relations of Motivation That Shift***

#### ***Consciousness***

Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology of embodied motivation is inseparable from his critical phenomenology of political action. Indeed, perhaps his most sustained and comprehensive treatment of the “fluid” concept of motivation occurs in his interpretations of historical materialism. The political “situation” proper to collective action is more historical than personal in nature. But just as perception, behavior, and other forms of embodied expression have to be understood as relations of motivation, the same principle applies to history as an expression of collective existence. Lived history, for Merleau-Ponty, is collectively embodied (or “inter-corporeal”). As such, it can be said that political action is *motivated* by the historical “situation as fact” experienced in common as problematic, and the response to this problem finds expression in the shared intentions or political project *motivating* the historical “situation as undertaken.”

For Merleau-Ponty, then, politics largely rests on collectively motivating/motivated perceptions of history. In this sense, history can be thought of as the institutional medium<sup>125</sup> that puts collective life in contact with both the immediately familiar (motivating) world of socio-cultural existence and the immediately unfamiliar (motivated) world of spontaneous contingencies that unexpectedly impinge on this. Without this medium, collective existence would either be completely familiar or completely unfamiliar (i.e., entirely motivating from within or entirely motivated from without). If purely motivating, the inertia of the past would make the “right decision” immediately self-evident in every collective situation encountered, such that the past would effectively predetermine present experience and future possibilities. This would amount to an unshakable collective identity and faith unmoved by the world and by time. A purely motivated history experienced from without, by sharp contrast, would offer no basis for collective identity or faith at all, and thus no precedent for collective decision-making (short of some standardized set of rigid instincts genetic to every individual from birth). Without a shared background inherited from the collective past, existence would be determined mechanically or algorithmically in reaction to objective conditions moment by moment. But *lived* history, as the intersubjective medium between the familiar and unfamiliar, both ‘internalizes’ and ‘externalizes’ collective existence.

“Internal history,” as we might call it, congeals collective life thanks to the shared background structures of lifeworld *sens* inherited from the past, expressed in the present, and projected towards a future to be realized. As Merleau-Ponty (1969, 130) puts it,

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<sup>125</sup> For Merleau-Ponty’s views on history as an institution with references to Marxian dialectics, see his course notes collected in *Institution and Passivity*. See in particular the section titled “Historical Institution: Particularity and Universality” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 62-75).

“history has a *Gestalt*, in the sense...[of] a holistic system moving toward a state of equilibrium.” This intersubjective background—articulated abstractly via cultural institutions and habitually reinforced in practice via social institutions—moves history forward largely in the form of common-sense ways of thinking, feeling, talking, and behaving. Hence, the “historical *a priori*” takes the mundane form of everyday routines—of people naturally doing what one does simply because that’s the way it’s done (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 90). What worked in the past tends to work in the present and will probably work in the future too. The continuity and momentum motivating history doesn’t express a singular direction, as vulgar readings of Hegel and Marx might have it. But highly general forms of lifeworld meaning, or structures of *sens* embodied in collectives (such as class), certainly do orient co-existence in a normative direction such that past, present, and future roundly make sense.

Yet, if history were understood solely as the expression of some totalizing logic motivating collective existence, the material dynamics of socio-cultural conflict and historical change would go unaccounted for. Not unlike Marx, therefore, Merleau-Ponty recognizes the essential insights of historicism but rejects any idealist or culturalist formulations. This is because collectives also experience something like an “external history” in the form of unexpected problems and other contingencies that call for a relatively conscious response. Socio-cultural existence doesn’t always find an agreeable world that confirms and reinforces “what worked in the past” moving forward (this would ultimately make consciousness superfluous). Collective life is full of unexpected events and unanticipated problems that have to be carefully questioned and attended. Hence, depending on the gravity of the problem in conjunction with the viability of

existing lifeworld institutions to meaningfully address it, communities may find themselves motivated to turn back and start questioning the intersubjective assumptions previously lodged in the background structures of internal history. Even in the most conservative societies, history isn't like an invisible hand pulling the past into the present or the present into the future. External history in particular pushes the present to actively redefine traditional existence and create new horizons of possibility. When this side of history proves existing socio-cultural assumptions inadequate in the face of intractable problems, collective experience may inform the general *sens* of things over time for the lifeworld community in question. As a double-sided expression, therefore, history is charged with preserving the comprehension, continuity, and inertia of collective existence, but is also subject to constant change and sometimes dramatic "detours."

How, then, might we understand the historic relations of motivation essential to political action? For Marxists, traction on this question largely pivots on coming to terms with the material and historic conditions within which class consciousness might emerge as a political force for revolutionary change. More specifically, the field in which class consciousness finds expression is largely mediated by the dialects of economic and cultural history. The Marxist tradition, however, was (and still is) philosophically divided on the question of class consciousness, and Merleau-Ponty's existential reading of historical materialism is largely in response to this bifurcation.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, not unlike his

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<sup>126</sup> The philosophical premise central to historical materialism prompting this divide pivots on whether dialectics should be understood primarily as an *historical* or a *material* phenomenon. The former tends to orient theory toward the cultural conditions of class consciousness, where ideology and reification weigh heavily on consciousness; the latter, by contrast, is largely focused on the economic conditions (social relations to nature mediated by labor) structuring consciousness. In the Critical Theory tradition, Alfred Schmidt (2014, 165) wrote in 1965: "The debate on the question of whether the dialectic is solely a law of history, or can also be derived from nature...is a genuine problem and not an invented one." Andrew Feenberg (2014, 43), a contemporary in this tradition, has stated that the history/nature dialectic (which

treatment of empiricism and idealism (and my treatment of hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism), Merleau-Ponty argues that Marxism is split between the objectivism characteristic of the “Orthodox” tradition of Marxism represented by the Soviet Union and the idealist strains of “Western” Marxism expressed on his side the European mainland.<sup>127</sup> The philosophical disagreement dividing them centers on opposing logics—or a monological conflict—of historic change. There is an extent to which Orthodox Marxism finds logical consistency in what we have called external history, where class consciousness is predominantly motivated by the structural contradictions of capitalism. But if the Orthodox camp risks economic reductionism, Western Marxists flirt with forms of cultural reductionism. Here, motivating class consciousness often rests too strongly on dispelling the internalized (reified) structures of history ideologically maintaining economic exploitation. For Merleau-Ponty, both positions overlook the relation of motivation essential to dialectics in general and class consciousness in particular.

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ultimately pivots on metaphysical questions of subject/object identity) represents the “most difficult conundrum” confronting the philosophy of praxis in the Marxian tradition.

<sup>127</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty doesn’t explicitly link the philosophical problem of Marxian dialects (history/nature, subject/object) to the split between the Western and Orthodox traditions, John Bellamy Foster does. In his defense of “the dialectics of nature,” he writes: “The question of the dialectics of nature has therefore constituted a major contradiction within Marxist thought. On the one hand, the powerful dialectical imagination that characterized Western Marxism rested on a historical-cultural frame of analysis focusing on human praxis that excluded non-human nature. On the other hand, Marx’s own dialectical and materialist ontology was predicated on the ultimate unity between nature and society, constituting a single reality and requiring a single science...concerned with the complex coevolutionary relations between society and nature” (Foster, Clark, York 2010, 215-216). Tracing this philosophical split to Lukacs’ rejection of Frederick Engels’ philosophy of dialectical nature, Foster explains that this rejection ultimately led Western Marxists to neglect *embodied labor* as the medium intertwining nature and culture or the material and historical—preferring instead to focus on consciousness and ultimately reducing ‘nature’ to a social category/construction. Interestingly, Foster (Ibid, 227-228) defends dialectical materialism by drawing on Marx’s 1844 discussion of labor as “human sensuous activity” in ways that parallel Merleau-Ponty’s (2012, 174-178) phenomenology of embodied perception and his “existential interpretation of dialectical materialism” (cf., Merleau-Ponty 1964b).

Pushing against empiricist (objectivist) tendencies in the Orthodox position, he writes: “Historical materialism is not an exclusively economic causality” (Ibid, 175). There is a certain “freedom” expressed in cultural history that is irreducible to economic relations, and in this respect the central focus Western Marxists place on class consciousness has some merit. And yet, critical of idealist tendencies in the latter, he adds that “an existential conception [of history] does not strip economic situations of their power of motivation” (Ibid, 176). Recalling his critique of objective thought to the extent that it “can only choose between reason and cause,” Merleau-Ponty argues that historical materialism at its best should never force a choice between these “two positions” (Ibid). “The greatness of Marxism lies not in its having treated economics as the principle or unique cause of history but in its treating cultural history and economic history as two abstract aspects of a single process” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 107).

If economics isn’t the “unique cause” of history, it’s equally true that culture does not create what we might call the unique logic or underlying reason driving history. Hence, education and cultural change in abstraction from economic existence isn’t likely to be effective. “If existence is the permanent movement by which man takes up and assumes a certain factual situation for himself, then none of his thoughts will be completely detached from the historical context in which he lives and, in particular, from his economic situation” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 177). The economy embodies the practical or material weight of history for everybody who must eat and live in that it institutionalizes social relations to nature for the sake of securing basic needs over time. Following the same basic logic describing the organism-environment relation in his first work *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty argues that social relations to nature

afford history something like an intersubjective *sens*. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, moreover, he speaks of the “historical *a priori*” as an “equilibrium of *forces*” that serve to stabilize a given gestalt or style of collective existence, and compares this to the “species *a priori*” analyzed in *Structure* where the organic body normatively orients relations to its natural *milieu* (Ibid, 90). Social institutions, and the economy in particular, largely organize or structure the givens of material existence, which are taken up culturally for the sake of realizing a meaningful future with some measure of comprehension and continuity. To the extent that the economy is generally stable and agreeable,<sup>128</sup> the socio-cultural continuity of material existence that results acquires an historical momentum of its own.

Economic life...is Marxism’s way of representing the inertia of human life: it is here that conceptions are registered and achieve stability. More surely than books or teaching, modes of work hand the previous generations’ way of being onto the new generation...[It is the] historical carrier of mental structures, just as our body maintains the basic features of our behavior beneath our varying moods; and this is the reason one will surely get to know the essence of a society by analyzing interpersonal relations as they have been fixed and generalized in economic life than through an analysis of the movements of fragile, fleeting ideas—just as one gets a better idea of a man from his conduct than from his thought. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 108)

Hence, the normative equilibrium of collective existence finds its material ballast in this particular institution, thus affording the structural coherence, stability, and orientation required if people are to make intersubjective sense of the world and their lives in it moving forward.

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<sup>128</sup> “Agreeable” in this sense doesn’t necessarily mean that the economy leaves everyone (e.g., in the working class) content, but that—among other things—general discontents don’t reach a critical threshold beyond which they become unmanageable by the ruling class.

Having dismissed objectivist and idealist conceptions of historical materialism, Merleau-Ponty is ready to offer his own existential formulation of the dialectics of history as a “motivating force” that intertwines economic and cultural life.

If it is neither ‘social nature’ given outside ourselves, nor the ‘World Spirit,’ nor the movement appropriate to ideas, nor collective consciousness, *then what is, for Marx, the vehicle of history and the motivating force of the dialectic?* It is man involved in a certain way of appropriating nature in which the mode of his relationship with others take shape; it is concrete human intersubjectivity, the successive and simultaneous community of existences in the process of self-realization in a type of ownership which they both submit to and transform, each created and creating the other. The question has sometimes been raised, and with reason, as to how a materialism could be dialectical; and how matter, taken in the strict sense of the word, could contain the principle of productivity and novelty which is called dialectic. It is because in Marxism ‘matter’—and, indeed, ‘consciousness’—is never considered separately. It is inserted in the human system of human coexistence where it forms the basis of a common situation of contemporary and successive individuals, assuring the generality of their projects and making possible a line of development and a sense of history. (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 129)

The existential answer in this passage to what has long been regarded as one of the most enduring philosophical problems confronting Marxism since Georg Lukács famously rejected Fredrick Engel’s naturalistic conception of dialectics, was already outlined in Merleau-Ponty’s (1963, 205) first work where he invokes the concept of gestalt as “the joining of an idea and an existence” via structures of *sens*. Applied to historical materialism, “the motivating force of the dialectic” centers on the relation between economic and cultural structures of *sens*.

The historical and material *continuity* of economic practice and cultural sensibility, we could say, marks the normative landscape motivating life in the industrialized world at some of the most general background levels of lifeworld existence. As a *motiving* force, economic and cultural history mutually reinforce one another in a symbiotic relationship such that systemic change is rendered difficult (and

sometimes easy to underestimate). Yet, while this explains how “concrete human intersubjectivity” is “created” by and “submits” to history as a culturally-reinforced economic reality, we haven’t yet accounted for how intersubjectivity actively “transforms” and “creates” this reality. Even the most content and conservative generation could look into its own past to recognize the dramatic transformations affected by previous generations that they now live by. A stable equilibrium of economic and cultural existence is indeed a powerful force motivating “internal” history. And yet, history is also *motivated* in response to the unforeseen contingencies that always problematize and thus challenge this socio-cultural gestalt to some degree or another. When this occurs under certain circumstances, cultural existence doesn’t just reinforce economic existence (or the background structures of social and socio-ecological relations). Particularly in response to systemic problems, generations might be motivated to dig into their own cultural past in efforts to find new ways of making sense of the collective problems they face in light of institutional failure—and actively address them as such in response. Referencing the passage above in which communities “both submit to and transform” history, Donald Landes (2013, 65) remarks that “Merleau-Ponty is already working out the implications of a notion of action that can be characterized as creatively playing forward the [motivating] weight of the past in negotiation with the [motivated] milieu toward a future.”

This notion of “action” as it describes what Landes calls Merleau-Ponty’s “politics of expression” points to where we want to go in grappling with the political quandary of transition in response to systemic climate change. But returning to Merleau-Ponty’s existential reading of historical materialism on our way to a critical

phenomenology of climate response, let us first examine the phenomenon of class consciousness as a concrete example of what Landes describes as “creatively playing forward” the socio-cultural weight of the past in response to present contingencies and future possibilities.

Culture, to begin with, is a double-edged sword in that it both reinforces and challenges socio-economic existence. As mentioned earlier, a kind of cultural “freedom” can emerge in creative response to historically-situated problems. In the Marxian context, class consciousness is the quintessential expression of this kind of freedom in the face of economic exploitation, and it is essential to organizing collective action against the structures maintaining systemic oppression. Under what conditions, then, does class consciousness emerge as an expression of freedom?

Although freedom is commonly sourced in pure subjectivity, it embodies an existential relation of motivation that—like perception, behavior, and existence in general—finds expression between the alternatives of subjective intentionality and objective conditions. Hence, as an expression of freedom, this point also applies to the emergence of class consciousness.

Objective thought deduces class consciousness from the objective condition of the proletariat. Idealist reflection reduces the proletarian condition to the proletarian’s consciousness of that condition...Neither the economy nor society, taken as a system of impersonal forces, determine me as a proletariat, but rather society or the economy such as I bear them within myself and such as I live them; nor is it, for that matter, an intellectual operation without any motive, but rather my way of being in the world within this institutional framework. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 468-469)

Class objectively situates proletarian existence. Recounting Marx’s theory of alienation (or Hegelian objectification), Merleau-Ponty explains that workers exist “at the mercy of unemployment and prosperity,” and are therefore rendered dependent on

conditions beyond their immediate grasp and influence. “And as a result, I feel like a foreigner in my factory, my nation, and my life. I am accustomed to dealing with a *fatum* [destiny] that I do not respect, but that must be humored” (Ibid, 469). Objectively rendered passive by their position in the economy, the worker’s project in life is driven, almost passively, by the demanding givens of the world: “I do not choose to experience it this way” (Ibid).

The economic background conditions situating class existence, therefore, motivate the worker’s perception of their place in the economic order of things as self-evident, and class consciousness may never emerge to break the spell of reification. The visceral need for material security is a powerful force motivating this spell, particularly to the extent that one intuitively understands the serious risks of affirming class consciousness.<sup>129</sup> Hence, reification isn’t simply forced onto the (passive) minds of people by material conditions or by ideological indoctrination alone. Consciously or unconsciously motivated by the threat of economic security, workers that assume the background perspective of their bosses (and the ruling class more generally) do so by taking up this perspective to actively situate themselves to this otherwise intolerable reality so that they can cope with it as comfortably as possible. And once coping strategies become intersubjectively sedimented in the background logic of existence in communion with others in this position, what was originally *motivated* by the figure of economic insecurity becomes a *motivating* force with a weight of its own. As this weight

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<sup>129</sup> This defensive phenomenon isn’t dissimilar to the existential problem discussed in chapter three where, as I argue, privileged lifeworld communities understand the serious risks of consciously affirming the ethical/systemic implications of the climate problem. Whether the perceived risks are better conceived as material or ontological (or both, as I suggest below), the basic need to ensure security in situations where viable answers seem nowhere to be found is common to each.

picks up inertia and increasingly solidifies identity in a workable relationship with one's situation, ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that challenge this habituated logic may not only threaten economic but *ontological* security. The existential anxieties signaling either form of insecurity might be strong enough to mobilize thought, feeling, and behavior in self-defense. But one can only imagine the true force of this reactive posture when economic and ontological insecurity find common ground. Under these conditions, intentionality is indeed heavily, if not absolutely, determined or "caused" in something like an objectivist sense, such that the "freedom" to challenge this lifeworld logic in any meaningful sense appears suicidal. Insofar as the need for immediate security—to exist in a safe and familiar world—carries the most weight, reification is more likely to take hold than class consciousness.

And yet, as labor movements and revolutions attest, sometimes class consciousness does in fact emerge. "How, then," Merleau-Ponty asks, "does this passage to class consciousness come about?" (Ibid, 469). Other motivations exist. Living under oppressive conditions, workers are to *some* extent motivated to actively reflect on their conditions in dialogue with others, come to consciously acknowledge their shared "situation as fact," and unite in solidarity to fight back. They might live with these competing motives unconsciously between immediate security and the prospect of a better future without ever finding relief from this tension. Importantly, however, the "situation as undertaken," or the choice to either play it safe or take affirmative responsibility for their own future, doesn't just depend on the relative strengths of each motive, as if one balances the weight of one against the other on a scale before making a

rational decision (Gardiner's mistaken assumption). Rather, it always depends on the existential *relation* intertwining these motives in the full contexts of lived experience.

Workers might indeed be in a desperate situation, and thus highly motivated to escape it. But if they perceive no pathways forward—if the socio-cultural space needed to intentionally respond to their conditions simply isn't available, or if they lack any hope that the risk is worth taking—they will either have to live with this frustrated need or, if possible, find relief by denying the implications of their situation. Truly resolving this tension requires enough lifeworld traction to at least begin a meaningful “answer” to their problem. That is, authentically *responding* to the figure of exploitation, however tentative at first, presupposes lifeworld-opening experiences that create space for productive forms of reflection, dialogue, social learning, and so on. Workers, in other words, must have reflexive experiences that unconsciously convince them at the start that class consciousness may indeed be the “answer” they were secretly looking for all along.

Consider, in this regard, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of class consciousness as motivated by the contingent “situation as fact”:

The worker learns that other workers in another trade have, after a strike, obtained an increased salary; he observes that shortly thereafter the salaries in his own factory are raised. The *fatum* with which he was grappling begins to become more clearly articulated. The day-laborer, who has rarely interacted with workers, who does not resemble them, and who is hardly fond of them, sees the price of manufactured goods increase, as well as the cost of living, and notices that one can no longer make ends meet. It might happen that, in that moment, he blames the workers of the city, and so class consciousness will not be born. If it is born, this is not because the day-laborer has decided to become a revolutionary and, consequently, to confer value upon his actual condition, but rather because he perceived concretely the synchronicity between his life and the lives of the workers, and the community of their lot in life... Social space begins to become polarized, and a region of “the exploited” appears. Upon every upsurge, coming from any point on the social horizon whatsoever, the regrouping takes shape beyond different ideologies and trades. Class is coming into being. (Ibid, 470)

The passage or lifeworld transition that Merleau-Ponty describes here is not unlike the gestalt shift of perception he describes in his shipwreck example or the gestalt shift to authenticity described in chapter three by Dreyfus. In each case, they express a lived process in which concrete and deeply contingent encounters in life motivate—in their specificity—a lifeworld reversal that turns back on the more *general* background conditions which, until then, were vaguely sensed as problematic but not reproachable as such. Eventually, if sufficient traction is achieved and reinforced over time, the structure of *sens* previously motivating the “natural attitude” or “lived logic” of lifeworld existence becomes refigured.

Grasped in terms of Gestalt theory, therefore, the background structures of lifeworld meaning motivating everyday existence don’t just contextualize the figure—in this case, the problem of exploitation—in a one-way relationship from subject to object. The figure can either confirm and reinforce background structures of *sens* or else challenge and refigure them in creative and sometimes dramatic fashion. Understood as an expression of critical freedom, therefore, class consciousness emerges when *previously backgrounded assumptions become foregrounded and restructured*.<sup>130</sup> From this point on, the advent class consciousness takes shape in the form of a new existential project that could either grow or wither over time depending on the degree of meaningful confirmation it receives moving forward. Here is Merleau-Ponty, in contrast

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<sup>130</sup> This is nicely explained by Kerry Whiteside’s (1988, 68-69) reading of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of freedom as expressed in perception: “Freedom consists not in an unrestricted capacity to define meaning, but an ability to modulate meanings by transforming elements of the sedimented field of perception. Our freedom comes from our ability to focus our attention on those background decisions, bring them to the foreground, and to see previously unperceived possibilities for change. Free action transforms prereflective choices, but never entirely transcends them.”

to the passage above, speaking of class consciousness intentionally motivating the “situation as undertaken”:

The revolutionary movement, like the work of the artist, is an intention that creates its own instruments and its own means of expression. The revolutionary project is not the result of deliberate judgment, nor the explicit positing of an end. This is what it is for the propagandist, because he has been trained by the intellectual, or for the intellectual, because he regulates his life on the basis of his thought. But the revolution only ceases to be the abstract decision of a thinker and becomes an historical reality if worked out in inter-human relations and in the relations of man with his work. Thus, it is true that I recognize myself as a worker or bourgeois the day I *situate myself* in relation to a possible revolution, and that this stand does not result, through some mechanistic causality, from my social status as a worker or bourgeois...; but no more is this a spontaneous, instantaneous, and unmotivated valuation – it was prepared for by a molecular process, it ripens in coexistence prior to bursting forth in words and relating to objective ends. (Ibid, 471; italics added)

It is only through this “molecular process” he explains, that workers “open onto the revolution that—had it been described and represented in advance—would have frightened them” (Ibid, 470).

Returning to the opening claim made earlier, class consciousness is neither *caused* by the economic situation as fact, nor is it simply achieved mentally by *reasoning* through what “the worker learns” in order to conceptualize his or her condition in a new light. The passage to class consciousness—the existential transition from ‘problem’ to ‘solution’ and vice-versa—is far more ambiguous than these reductive accounts allow: “Neither the facts nor the free act that destroys them are represented; they are lived in ambiguity” (Ibid, 471). Reflecting on the dualistic split between Western and Orthodox Marxism, Merleau-Ponty thus concludes: “Idealism and objective thought equally miss the arrival of class consciousness, the first because it deduces actual existence from

consciousness, the other because it derives consciousness from actual existence, and both of them because they are unaware of the relation of motivation” (Ibid, 473).

Indeed, all monological expressions of dualism, including those analyzed in previous chapters, are “unaware of the relation of motivation,” which also means that they are unaware of the philosophical significance of ambiguity. As Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions suggest, the relations of motivation at play when gestalt shifts in perception and class consciousness occur are *necessarily* “lived in ambiguity.” Grasped in terms of lifeworld transition, I would argue that Merleau-Ponty’s turn to the phenomena in these concrete examples help answer the existential problem of dualism noted by Dewey where what is precisely at issue is this lived capacity for *transition*. If, as a “merely” philosophical problem, dualism amounts to an inability to understand the kind of lifeworld transitions that Merleau-Ponty’s describes in the practical contexts of perception, consciousness, and history, it stands to reason that answering the problem of dualism requires carefully focusing on lived experience in action before all else.

Turning to the climate situation, this common struggle to negotiate the essential ambiguities of motivating/motivated existence is precisely what renders the critical transition from ‘problem’ to ‘solution’ and vice-versa unimaginable. Hence, bringing home the point to be made in this section, Merleau-Ponty’s account of the relations of motivation expressed in the emergence of class consciousness sheds light on the existential challenges of motivating ethical responsibility and political intentionality in response to the climate issue. Once this is recognized, the need for a critical phenomenology of climate response becomes more apparent. So far, however, Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of lifeworld transition vis-à-vis the beach stroller and the worker

remain too individualistic in focus to help us with the historic challenges essential to political action. In this respect, our treatment of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy at this point remains "meta-political." In what follows, I take a closer look at how history situates political perception and consciousness.

### ***Lived History as an Existential Barrier to Action***

How might we grapple with the existential problem of motivating climate transition in terms of Merleau-Ponty's lifeworld philosophy of motivation? Paraphrasing his question about class consciousness cited above, how might the passage to climate consciousness come about? The figure of systemic climate change, to begin with, must be collectively received as the ultimate contingency of external history before an historic shift beyond industrial existence is possible. Yet, we know from the examples of the shipwreck and class consciousness that gestalt shifts aren't just motivated from without by the figure alone. This also requires finding meaningful traction in the background norms motivating the shift from within, as when Merleau-Ponty describes the worker finally recognizing "myself as a worker the day I *situate myself* in relation to a possible revolution." The identity shift that comes with class consciousness not only presupposes being economically situated by the hard realities of exploitation *pushing* for consciousness, but also something *pulling* intentional consciousness forward—a positive vision that enables people to situate themselves to an alternative. Again, hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism need one another to motivate public action.

In an effort to find language to articulate historical relations of motivation, we might say that the familiar continuity, inertia, and equilibrium that defines internal history

*centers* lifeworld existence, and understand the contingencies, adversities, and the other disruptions defining external history as *decentering* lifeworld existence. When unexpected problems fully emerge (as in the Pearl Harbor attacks mentioned earlier), it could seem as if history itself is calling for a collective response in an effort to find new equilibrium.<sup>131</sup> Historical problems impinging on collective existence include economic recessions and depressions; national and international struggles for power, especially war; social conflicts and injustices concerning class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on; cultural conflicts over religious, ethnic, and ideological assumptions about the meaning of life, the good society, human nature, and the human relationship to nature; and socio-ecological disruptions in the face of natural disasters and environmental issues. Systemic problems that are socio-cultural in depth and historical in scope (climate change being paradigmatic) tend to cut across these categories.

Now if collective problems are perceived such that they can be confidently and agreeably addressed within the socio-cultural parameters of familiar lifeworld norms and practices, traditional background assumptions will likely be decisive. In other words, insofar as people feel collectively prepared to address the problem at hand, the inertia of internal history motivating a sensible response will outweigh the motivated force of external history. Hence, when disruptions are experienced as marginal, the “problem” can be safely approached within the pool of “solutions” ready to hand.<sup>132</sup> But if, by contrast,

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<sup>131</sup> Importantly, “calling” for something isn’t the same as “answering” it (in the Pearl Harbor example, Roosevelt’s speech largely did this for many as far as the public was concerned). Lived history collectively motivates—but doesn’t determine—existence.

<sup>132</sup> As I argue in the second chapter, climate change has been predominantly framed as a technocratic problem from the very beginning largely because technocratic *solutions* were deemed economically and politically viable. Furthermore, considering the mechanistic and progressive assumptions structuring the lifeworld project of human dominion discussed in chapter three (and revisited later in this chapter), there are

the problem is deeply unprecedented and proves to fall outside the confines of internal history, institutionalized solutions won't work. In this case, as when confronting systemic issues, problems motivated by external history should carry more weight.

Of course, with climate change in mind, we know that systemic problems aren't always immediately felt with the weight of external history. Understanding why requires, not comparing the motives of internal and external history from a God's-eye view, but instead always returning to the dialectical relations of motivation that center and decenter lived history. To get a better sense of how historic relations of motivation find concrete expression in political situations, we could do no better than to investigate more deeply Merleau-Ponty's 1945 essay mentioned in the chapter introduction, "The War Has Taken Place." In my view, this poignant meditation on politics is among the best examples we have of "the engaged philosopher" putting philosophy in meaningful contact with the world. But more significantly for the purposes of this chapter, his attempt to introduce a "thinkable politics" affords accessible philosophical entry to a critical phenomenology of climate response.

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cultural reasons for this as well. Indeed, I employ the word "enframed" with Heidegger in mind, who argues that experience under modernity tends to be consistently enframed ahead of time by the (lifeworld) meaning of 'technology' as human power over nature—and by extension, the world more generally. Environmental philosophers drawn to Heidegger from Deep Ecology (Devall and Sessions 1985) to eco-phenomenologists like Bruce Foltz (1995) and Bryan Bannon (2014) tend to center on Heidegger's critique of technology, as does Ruth Irwin (2011) in *Heidegger, Politics, and Climate Change*. This tendency, moreover, hasn't just been noticed by Western critics. Contrasting "American Indian knowledge" with Western science, Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. (2001, 21) observes that the latter characteristically interpret the world via generalized abstractions ("laws"), prompting scientists to table phenomena outside this established paradigm as "anomalies." Elsewhere, after noting the reductive character of Western science and metaphysics, he writes: "The reductionist view of the world is further enhanced by the spectacular success of modern technology. Natural forces are brought under human control, and cosmic energies bring us both power and entertainment" (Ibid, 57). By contrast, "American Indian knowledge of the world does not suffer this structural handicap... There were no anomalies because Indians retained the ability to wonder at the behavior of nature, and they remembered even those most abstruse things with the hope that one day the relationship of these things to existing knowledge would become clear" (Ibid, 21-22).

Recall that Merleau-Ponty opens the essay by asking his French contemporaries how they could have waited so long to go to war. Despite being aware of “the facts” as one Nazi transgression followed another, they were not “guided” by them because “these certainties belonged to the world of thought.” In this context, Merleau-Ponty (1964c, 139) places the blame squarely on the Cartesian spirit of prewar French liberalism that conceived society as a conglomeration of consciousnesses “always ready for peace and happiness.” Facts that interfered with this “optimistic philosophy” didn’t register, or perhaps they merely carried the weight of an interpretation. Hence, prewar Nazi aggression signaled the political facts of the French situation, and this *should* have motivated a timely response before it was too late. But before the war had taken place, it was too easy for the French to universalize their preconceived notions of egocentric rationality, along with liberal intentions for peace, freedom, and happiness to all human beings or “consciousnesses” regardless of geography and history.

From our birth we had been used to handling freedom and to living an individual life... We were consciousness naked before the world. How could we have known that this individualism and this universalism had their place on the map? What makes our landscape of 1939 inconceivable to us and puts it once and for all beyond our grasp is precisely the fact that we were not conscious of it as a landscape... We did not know that this is what it was to live in peace, in France, and in a certain world situation. (Ibid, 140)

But alas, as Merleau-Ponty saw it, it took a war, and indeed being an occupied people during the thick of it, before the French felt concretely situated “on the map” of world politics beyond their immediate grasp and influence—beyond their personal intentions, their intersubjective projects, and the lifeworld *sens* unique to their history. It wasn’t until the Nazis occupied French existence itself, and as word came in that an entire generation around the world was being thrown into the carnage of battle, that the

historic weight of their concrete situation was truly felt. Unfortunately, they had to learn the hard way that their experience was indeed historically situated in relation to other “landscapes,” and that this left them vulnerable to the ambiguities and contingencies exceeding them.

There’s a sense, therefore, in which the national history intrinsic to liberal French identity desensitized them to the ‘external’ weight of history—a weight, for instance, that would otherwise have made them more acutely aware of their ‘internal’ limitations to make sense of things and thus more openly discerning or perceptive. This, for Merleau-Ponty, left French decision-makers politically unprepared on the world stage to grasp the unfolding contingencies pointing to a possible war before succumbing to Nazi occupation. A political grasp of history—one better equipped to recognize and question its own landscape on the map, and thus recognize and question what it might encounter beyond it—could have improved French perception. That is, a more comprehensive context would not only have helped put the facts into proper perspective (in order to ascertain what they might be suggesting), but might have sensitized the French to *their* way of making sense of them. Ultimately, for Merleau-Ponty, a “thinkable” politics beyond the “perspective of consciousness” embodies a skilled ability to critically mediate or transition between the sensibilities of lifeworld intentionality and the historical and material givens of the situation where the consequences of action and inaction also inform motivation.

“To sum it all up,” Merleau-Ponty (Ibid, 150) concludes, “we have learned history, and we claim that it must not be forgotten.” The war taught the French that there are institutions, events and tendencies, and a confrontation with “external absurdities”

that force a point of view on them as if from the outside—larger forces like those leading up to the war that could render them passive, but also ‘internal’ forces that could actively put their freedom in contact with the world (as expressed in the French Resistance movement). Freedom—and here we mean freedom as an expression of political agency—begins with shared experiences of being historically situated by contingencies in ways that give real weight to one’s actions because the consequences are felt to matter.

As I’ve suggested, Merleau-Ponty’s existential reading of prewar France speaks to the historical situation confronting the industrialized world today. The “external absurdity” of climate change doesn’t just concern the cognitive meaninglessness or senselessness of this situation (as if from scientific illiteracy). Not unlike the prewar French situation, the climate issue represents a higher-order of absurdity precisely because, despite its gravity, the essential absurdity of this situation isn’t widely perceived in the first place. As Lifton (2017) suggests, climate absurdity in this existential sense takes the form of a kind of “malignant normality.” Just as the French didn’t feel seriously vulnerable to Nazi aggression, and politically failed to respond to this threat when critical moments of decision emerged, it is evident that many in the industrialized world today are too optimistic, even if this isn’t consciously recognized. That is, many seem to embody a “malignant” faith in the solving power of existing institutions, and to this extent don’t feel existentially *situated* by the specter of climate change—and thus *vulnerable* to it as an existential threat. With undue confidence in the system that supports them, the power elite certainly aren’t going to confront the systemic roots of this issue without massive pressure from below. Unfortunately, as I’ve also suggested, the historic and material weight of the climate problem isn’t sufficiently felt “below,”

meaning the public doesn't feel situated by it either.<sup>133</sup> Climate change, I submit, has not yet "taken place" in the lived experience of collective existence at a general level. As such, too many are not motivated to take ethical and political responsibility for it.

Whether one considers the French situation before the looming threat of war or our situation today before the looming threat of climate change, a "thinkable" politics is impossible to the extent that an existential abyss effectively divides internal and external history. Put otherwise, the political failures in each case can be understood as an existential failure to become effectively "decentered" by the problem at hand.

Perhaps this point can be summed up in Merleau-Ponty's argument that viable political action requires a sensitivity to the subtle ways in which, as he says, "history attracts and seduces." Insofar as the background structures of lifeworld identity prove ill-prepared to find meaningful traction with the contingencies of collective existence calling for a response, the passive inertia of internal history will override the facts of external history. In other words, substantial incongruities between the intersubjectively familiar and the unfamiliar, or between the socio-culturally motivating and the politically motivated dimensions of the historical situation, will likely leave general problems generally unresolved. In the climate case, the motivating inertia of institutionalized existence can "seduce" us into placing undue confidence in "our intentions—what our actions mean for us" over "the external consequences of our actions."

But the seductions of history take other forms as well. If, in some ways, many living in industrial societies feel underwhelmed by the systemic realities of climate

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<sup>133</sup> As always, these blanket propositions ultimately require qualification, since "the public" is far from being a homogenous body. This point is thematized below.

change, in others respects many feel *overwhelmed* by these realities. As argued in chapter three, the existential implications of the climate issue are often received in direct conflict with lifeworld identity. Here, people aren't exactly seduced with invulnerable optimism into believing that they—supported by their seemingly powerful institutions—can collectively situate their *own* relation to history by solving every problem that comes their way. Instead, perhaps for those people (or those parts of us) that acknowledge the *powerlessness* of these institutions to really solve this problem, the ominous weight of external history is just too much to cope with—thus prompting escapism. Allowing oneself to become *too* decentered runs the existential risk of completely losing the traction required to “recenter” their identity again. History prompts denial either way, but the relations of motivation expressed in each case are quite different.

Indeed, considering the existential phenomenology of climate denial discussed in the third chapter, these distinct motives can be quite subtle in expression and easily misdiagnosed. For instance, seemingly “apathetic” responses to the climate situation could easily lead observers to assume that people are underwhelmed by this issue when what is actually being expressed is a defensive reaction to being *overwhelmed* by it. In an effort to maintain our center, we might pretend to others, and thus ourselves, not to care (or we put more weight on our ignorance than our understanding, etc.) in order to protect us from the crushing implications of the situation. In the phenomenological language of motivation, this misdiagnosis might assume that the motivating power of lifeworld intentionality is blithely overriding the motivated situation when in fact the opposite is occurring. Hence, somewhere between the structural and the psychological, a critical phenomenology sensitive to the landscape of climate consciousness and serviceable to a

thinkable politics of climate response, must help us learn to carefully identify the relations of motivation being expressed in various ways of being in the world.

In the context of Merleau-Ponty's essay, the existential difference between being underwhelmed and overwhelmed by the historical situation can be seen by comparing the French experience discussed above with German Parisians that he personally encountered who, like the former, also had to come to terms with the historical contingencies of Nazi aggression. In particular, he recalls informing a German Parisian that the Nazis had just taken Prague—an early signal of Hitler's intentions. The German's reaction was telling. He jumped up and exclaimed

with every intention of sincerity, "But that is mad! That is impossible!" Naiveté? Hypocrisy? Probably neither. These fellows said what they thought, but they didn't think anything very clearly, and they kept themselves in the dark to avoid a choice between their humanism and their government, a choice by which they would have lost respect either for themselves or for their country. (Merleau-Ponty 1964c, 140-141)

What, after all, was a German Parisian to do in this situation? Authentically digesting the facts of Nazi aggression would, as Merleau-Ponty says, have forced an unbearable choice between "their humanism and their government." If their historical sense of themselves as, say, decent human beings or civilized Europeans proved decisive, this might have compelled a critical response to Hitler as the figurehead of the German people. Indeed, taking this path in light of new facts might have forced a deeply uncomfortable reevaluation of their collective identity as a proud Germans (no doubt powerfully instilled at the time). But if the *other* choice was made to affirm and justify Hitler's actions, this would have forced a redefinition of human decency and European civility to an understandably incredulous Frenchman.

Both aspects of themselves, their nationality and their humanism, were intertwined in the historical landscape intrinsic to German identity as they lived it. And yet, given their social situation living in Paris, this unfathomable series of unexpected contingencies (the “external” side of history centering on the rise of Hitler on the Europeans stage) threatened to bring these essential aspects of their identity into mortal conflict. Hence, unless forced to make such a choice, it’s better in this moment at least to keep oneself “in the dark” by any means possible (typically in the form of bad faith rationalizations contrived on the spot to cover over the conflict and maintain lifeworld integrity to the best of their ability).

For the French and Germans both, the facts were received as external absurdities to the extent that neither really had the lifeworld traction to recenter themselves by meaningfully processing and responding to them with intention. The inertia of lived history roughly characteristic of the national identity of each case proved more decisive than the critical weight of historical contingency calling for a conscious response. And yet, even though both encountered the same facts centering on the historical figure of Nazism, and even though their response to these events both denied their concrete significance, an existential difference obtains between them. That is, despite superficial similarities in the “objective causes” of denial or the “subjective reasons” for it, their motivations are different. Again, if the Germans that Merleau-Ponty encountered were overwhelmed by external history, or the unexpected contingencies of their situation, it would be more accurate to suggest that the French were underwhelmed.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> These distinct expressions of denial roughly correspond to Stanley Cohen’s distinction between “active” and “passive” denial (2001, 32).

Coming to terms with the existential difference between the seductions of history motivating denial in the French and German situations, I suggest, can help us grapple with the motivational landscape marking the existential problem of climate response. Although some predominantly experience invulnerable confidence while others tend to feel anxiously vulnerable, it's likely that many today are both underwhelmed and overwhelmed by the climate problem as the ultimate contingency of lifeworld existence in the industrialized world. Considering the quandary of denying climate responsibility discussed in chapter three and the quandary of transitioning between problem-driven and solution-driven motivates for public action covered in chapter four, the French situation speaks to a hard medicine critique of positive vision culturalism while the German situation lends itself to a critique in the opposite direction.

### ***Hard Medicine and Positive Vision Relations of Motivation***

Not unlike our current situation with respect to the realities of climate change disclosed by science, the prewar French would seem to have had every reason to acknowledge the reality of Nazi aggression and respond accordingly. Yet, because they didn't feel historically situated by the Nazi threat before occupation, they didn't accurately sense their vulnerability—their perception of the facts didn't motivate a decisive response. Always ready for peace and happiness, the French couldn't see beyond (or let go of) their hopes for reasonable negotiation despite evidence that the Nazi regime didn't share their liberal assumptions. Compared to the German Parisians, the facts of their historical situation didn't exactly *force* them into the dark. And before the war had taken place, history hadn't yet forced them into the light either. As mentioned earlier,

many were aware of concentration camps and other disturbing events and tendencies, but they merely carried the weight of an interpretation before the war had taken place. That is, they were not “guided by the facts” of external history—not from lack of knowledge of the facts but because they couldn’t effectively reconcile them with the “optimistic” philosophy of consciousness motivating French existence. Ultimately, the prewar French were unwittingly swept up by the motivating weight of their own inertia: “Thus when we look closely at things, we find culprits nowhere but accomplices everywhere; so it is that we all played a part in the events of 1939” (Ibid, 141).

With climate denial in mind, a charitable reading of the hard medicine stance is possible in light of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy for those recognizing something similar going on today. There’s certainly a sense in which many in the industrialized societies bearing historical responsibility for climate change don’t feel adequately situated by—and thus realistically vulnerable to—the climate situation as fact. Arguably, the socio-cultural inertia motivating industrialization induce many to passively believing that the very institutions causing the climate problem will eventually solve it. As expressed by the prewar French, optimistic faith in one’s general background intentions is proportional to a general inability to see beyond it. In my view, we see this socio-cultural faith expressed in liberal instincts to rely on technocratic fixes and political pragmatism, but also in the positive vision logic of Hulme, Swyngedouw, Manchin, and others that consistently prioritize cultural solutions over the materiality of this historical problem.

Grappling with the virtues of hard medicine realism in Merleau-Pontian terms, then, we can reaffirm their basic point that the public needs to be motivated by the climate situation as fact. This seems required to critically question and challenge the

lifeworld inertia of industrialization historically motivating both the objective realities of climate change and the subjective realities of climate denial. This motivating factor, recall, is structurally rooted in the internal history culminating in the Industrial Revolution, and increasingly reinforced in the socio-cultural background of lifeworld existence since then (particularly via consumerism). The lifeworld inertia of socio-ecological domination institutionalized in the past, expressed in the present, and oriented towards a future to be realized informs the “atmosphere of generality” that, to varying degrees, we have all passively inherited and continue to live in (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 223). Taking a hard medicine position, then, we recognize that the Eurocentric, patriarchal, and bourgeois dream of industrial prosperity—organizing projects to scientifically order, technologically control, and economically appropriate nature—is profoundly contradicted by the material implications of climate change. And yet, too many of us today don’t feel the weight of this contradiction because we do not feel situated by the hard realities of the climate problem.

That many don’t *feel* situated, however, doesn’t mean that they aren’t.<sup>135</sup> Insofar as climate change is intersubjectively acknowledged as a common problem at some

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<sup>135</sup> To get a better grasp of the motivations at play here, we should be clear that they are certainly situated in a material sense but their *relation* to the situation remains underwhelming. Indeed, to be clear about what it is to be “situated” by climate change in an existential sense, keep in mind that the lifeworld tensions that define the climate situation *as* a “situation” have only recently emerged on the stage of history. The situation, recall, is defined by relations of motivation. It is precisely in this sense that the climate *situation* simply didn’t exist for the many generations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (even in the wake of the industrial revolution). Although we know now that they were in fact participating in the material destabilization of the climate, they were entirely “unsituated” by the phenomenon of climate change because their existence preceded public awareness of climate change as a problematic *consequence* of their lifeworld projects or ways of being in the world. So the sense in which contemporary generations feel unsituated and unmotivated is categorically different from their ancestors who really *were* unsituated (and thus purely unmotivated). Being situated always involves relations of motivation that come when our prereflective intentions come into contingent contact with the other side of our intentional activities in semi-conscious anticipation of the consequences of following them through. Hence, given that relations of motivation only pertain to lived situations, what we

background level today, we are indeed situated and thus motivated to some extent to address it as *historic* beings, as opposed to purely rational ones, if for no other reason than to relieve the uneasy tensions lived between internal and external history (and thereby regain historical equilibrium and recenter lifeworld identity). Despite being situated by the climate problem at some vague level, however, hard medicine proponents intuitively understand that this situation remains underwhelming for too many people. Hence, it seems only the traditional authority of science has enough weight to get people to ethically *reflect* on their situation in earnest. “Reflection,” as Merleau-Ponty puts it: “does not withdraw from the world...; rather, it steps back in order to...loosen the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear; it alone is conscious of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical” (Ibid, lxxvii). On this view, reflection is motivated consciousness—and genuine reflection on the hard scientific realities of climate change seems desperately needed to “loosen” the profound socio-cultural grip of internal history motivating climate change and climate denial alike. Indeed, the climate situation is inherently “strange and paradoxical,” if only reflection were prepared to consciously confront the absurd depths of this existential quandary. From this perspective, therefore, purely cultural interpretations of this issue risk covering over the strange paradoxes of the climate situation that might otherwise motivate climate consciousness and reflection.

Yet, despite their merits on this charitable reading, proponents of the hard medicine perspective have yet to “learn history” in Merleau-Ponty’s sense. When

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now call climate change has only become a *situation* over the past few decades as it emerged as a public issue or as an historical contingency calling for response.

Merleau-Ponty criticized French liberalism, he wasn't suggesting that they needed to one-sidedly prioritize the extrinsic consequences or contexts of their actions *over* the intrinsic meaning of these action.<sup>136</sup> Likewise, the worker in Merleau-Ponty's description wasn't jolted into class consciousness by suddenly becoming situated by the naked facts of economic exploitation irrespective of the inherited landscape already situating his relation to the world.<sup>137</sup> As a dialectical relation of motivation, the emergence of class consciousness and climate consciousness alike must be understood reflexively. As always, the motivated weight of external history cannot simply be placed on a scale against the motivating weight of internal history.

Indeed, as Norgaard and positive vision critics recognize, the risks of scientifically packaging climate reality as a flaming asteroid on trajectory to blast through the internal history of lifeworld identity can backfire in deeply reactionary and apolitical ways. Too often, invitations to reflect on the hard realities of climate change don't simply ask people to "loosen" the intentional threads that normatively bind them to the world of common experience but to effectively sever them. It has to be reiterated that the significance of an issue like climate change has to be meaningfully processed if it is to inspire action—which means that the climate problem must speak *to* cultural identity, not over it. Otherwise, people may very well be motivated to address the climate problem, but the "problem" in this case will be how to defend themselves against the immaterial

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<sup>136</sup> Arguably, however, this position is accented in the essay, particularly in the beginning when discussing the failures of French liberalism to respond to "the facts" of Nazi aggression (as opposed to *just* relying on their intentions).

<sup>137</sup> And, we could add from our discussion of visual perception, it's also true that the sudden appearance of the shipwreck wasn't simply motivated by this strange thing alone. This gestalt shift depended just as much on the perceiver's normative background familiarity with coastal landscapes for the perceptual traction needed to dialogically engage this abnormal object standing out from the scene.

implications of climate change as an existential threat to collective identity. Rather than dispelling reification and inspiring political action, anxieties could motivate people to cling to, or double-down on, the normative assumptions that provided lifeworld security in the past. Without the cultural traction and security afforded by the collective past and lived in the present, motives are likely to turn inwards in self-defense, not transition towards future horizons of possibility capable of politically transcending the problem.

Considering the overwhelming motivations prompting this kind of denial, one could from a Merleau-Pontian perspective lend credibility to the positive vision critique of hard medicine realism by turning once again to his descriptions of the German Parisian experience. Any universal logic of ethical responsibility in pure form would insist that Parisian Germans in this situation should *immediately* confront the naked realities of the government they work for and strongly identify with (and by implication immediately renounce their identity). But we know that this impossible situation is more likely to motivate escapism than responsibility, precisely because the situation doesn't just include the facts but also one's background relation to them. Hence, given their circumstances living in Paris, the weight of external history must have been overwhelming, compelling them to take an immediately defensive stance against the facts. Indeed, under the judgmental gaze of suspicious French peers, one could easily imagine them doubling-down on their rationalizations. As with the exploited worker, time and the "molecular process" of meaningful experience—not just ethical duties, rational principles, or sheer willpower—are needed to process problematic situations. If coming to terms with the "situation as fact" were a viable possibility for these Germans, doing so would have required working *through*—not just against—their national identity. Beginning from

where they stand as the living expression of a history that they did not choose but defines them, they must somehow find room in their collective past for a meaningful response to their existential situation.

Unlike the French who succumbed more-or-less passively to the inertia of their own history, the Germans seemed to take a predominantly active role by rationalizing their denial. Merleau-Ponty was therefore right to say that the Germans *kept themselves* in the dark, implying intention. Importantly, however, their intentions were more reactive than proactive. Positive vision critics can thus argue that intrinsically powerful visions of hope are needed to motivate intentions for change in *political*, rather than self-defensive, directions. When officially-sanctioned representatives of objective Nature or History—or what we have called external history—overrule the history intrinsic to intersubjective identity in the name of universal facts, they risk neutralizing and depoliticizing the motivating intentions essential to inspiring collective action. We certainly want to avoid the kind of situation that compelled the Germans to reactively escape rather than proactively respond.

In contrast to the hard medicine position, the agonistic strain of positive vision culturalism is particularly aware of other “landscapes” on the pluralistic map of radical democracy. The internal history of each deserves *a priori* respect. And yet, like their counterparts, this monological stance also fails to learn history, for the relation of motivation essential to history and politics alike are overlooked just the same. If the hard medicine logic of ethical responsibility centers the motivated situation as fact over the motivating situation as undertaken, the positive vision logic of political intentionality tends in the opposite direction. The latter forgets that meaningfully situating oneself in

response to political issues presupposes being situated *by* the problem to begin with. Motivating cultural intentions for political change require their being *elicited* (motivated) by the world of things and others beyond their immediate purview. This is as true for the German Parisians that identified with the Nazi government as it is today for those that identify with the world order of industrial capitalism. People need to be situated/motivated from without in order to find the motivating sources of meaning required to critically challenge and re-structure lifeworld assumptions from within. Hence, visions of hope capable of motivating historical and material change moving forward have to be motivated in dialogue with the hard realities *calling* for change.

Considering the German Parisian case to illustrate this, I mentioned earlier that time and meaningful experience are needed to reevaluate lifeworld assumptions and work through the problematic situation in question at this background level. Of course, this may not be a viable option for some personalities. Perhaps predispositions in some to identify with Hitler as the essence and savior of German greatness and identity carry too much weight for some to be dispelled by time and experience. Insecure hardliners, for instance, might find that turning against the Parisians they once respected in order to reaffirm Nazi Germany is the only reaction they could live with (to decisively relieve the unease and existential fatigue of constantly rationalizing on the spot in self-defense, for example).<sup>138</sup>

For other Germans, however, the Nazi experience might hang over them like a vague problem held in suspension that, like the economically-exploited worker not yet

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<sup>138</sup> To take a current and particularly conspicuous example, unshakable supporters of President Trump that strongly identify with his vision to “make America great again” often go to tremendous lengths to cover over conflicts between promise and action, meaning and reality.

ready for class consciousness, is lived but not yet reproachable. Having enough stamina to endure a life of profound ambiguity for a time but not enough to last forever, experience will likely decide how this existential tension finds resolution one way or another. If, for example, these particular Germans encountered the French shaming Germany in sweeping terms as a nation of barbarians and the like, they may decide to join the German hardliners to resolve this intensified and overwhelming tension. If, by contrast, their “humanity” somehow found open support in their Parisian environment, this might afford them the security and thus stamina needed to keep this existential tension alive. Perhaps, with the distance afforded them living in another country while the public back home was being systemically whipped into a frenzy of irrationality to support an irrational war, they harbored discontents with Hitler’s rhetoric that had to be buried while holding their positions. In any event, should they make that all-important secret decision to side with their humanity over the Nazi government as the “true” expression of their national identity and source of goodness, reflections motivated by the figure of Hitler may turn inward to expose and critically question key lifeworld assumptions previously hidden in the background.

It’s conceivable, then, that some Parisian Germans in this historical situation might have found the space they needed to honestly come to terms with Nazi aggression for what it was. Authentically reflecting on the moral implications of their situation in dialogue with others similarly affected (i.e., others also suspended in ambiguity), they might meaningfully distinguish what they “rightly” identify with as proud Germans from what they “wrongly” identified with. As the fabled Owl of Minerva spreads its wings, a critical reevaluation of the background logic of their national identity could take hold in

germ as they collectively strive to make sense of what happened and live with themselves in ways free of either false confidence or crushing shame. One might ask, for example, if top-down affirmations of “blood and soil” Aryan purity, power, and greatness—so seductive as the German people struggled reclaim their cultural pride in the desperate and humiliating years between the world wars—predisposed the public at large to find misguided relief and purpose in the Third Reich. And if, they might wonder in a mood of responsible reflection, these cultural assumptions remain unquestioned, aren’t we Germans *still* vulnerable to being seduced into national frenzies by future dictators?

Hence, reflection and dialogue intent on learning history in light of problems suffered, and reforming the landscape of German identity, accordingly, would seem to require the kind of ethically motivated courage that, in my view, is undermined by the positive vision stance. Understood as a relation of motivation, positive vision intentionality and hard medicine reflection ultimately require dialogical intercourse. If the *sens* of one’s train of thought point only to irreparable national—and by extension, personal—shame and hopelessness, the anxieties of a looming identity crisis would likely stop reflection in its tracks (indeed, decades passed in Germany before the first books honestly dealing with the Nazi past were published for the public). This may not be the case, however, if reflective and affective dialogue were not just ethically motivated to change in reaction to a problematic past but could also *pull itself forward* by finding motivating strength in a revitalized sense of the “true meaning” of German existence.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> This “true meaning” doesn’t have to be universal to German identity as such. Indeed, as I mention, uncritical assumptions of a uniform public are essential to motivating totalitarianism, and this is precisely one of the historical lessons to be learned. The pool of meaning intrinsic to German history/experience might be common to virtually everyone in some background sense, but how these sources of meaning are *taken up* will vary across differently-situated lifeworld communities.

In this scenario, a “positive vision” might take hold to restructure the various outlines of German identity and, in so doing, inspire a new future with enough pull to materialize. Despite persistent tendencies traceable to their fascist past, this is arguably what has happened for many Germans in the generations following Hitler. Assumptions about racial superiority, “blood and soil” collectivism, the “Jewish problem,” the destiny of German imperialism, etc., haven’t simply disappeared, but they have been pushed to the margins and neutralized to a significant degree. Indeed, learning from the extremes of totalitarian nationalism defining the fascist experiment, it could be argued that the very notion of a unified national identity has largely fallen into disrepute. Consider, for instance, Germany’s prominent role in the European Union, which evolved partly as an antidote to the excesses of nationalism.

To be clear, my admittedly speculative reflections here are meant to be more rhetorical than factually descriptive. But my point is this: if a collectively motivated reach back into the cultural past authentically exposes problematic structures unconsciously motivating lifeworld identity, this intentional activity might open enough space in the background to discover and revitalize latent sources of meaning pregnant with possibility. It’s at this lived juncture that the existential transition from ‘problem’ to ‘solution’ and back again becomes a real—but by no means guaranteed—possibility. Considering the dialects of motivation in this example, it can be said first that the Germans had to be passively situated/motivated *by* the naked facts of their Nazi past before they could come to terms with it in the lived present with some measure of authenticity. The intentional dimensions of reflection, dialogue, and action required for this, however, also meant that the Germans in question were situating/motivating *themselves* to their past in an active

effort to meaningfully distinguish what they wrongly identified with (leading to the Nazi movement) from what they should rightly identify with as self-respecting Germans moving forward. With growing distance from a painful and anxious past together with a growing hope that it can be confidently confronted and overcome, we might wonder if in some paradoxical sense our hypothetical Germans intentionally deepened their ethical situation by becoming *actively situated* by their problematic past. Perhaps one could argue that, in the final (existential) analysis, there could be nothing more truly ethico-political in nature than such a gestalt shift.

In any case, I only submit that the relations of motivation required to become “problem-driven” have to find normative traction in “solution-driven” motivations sourced in the past while being simultaneously reoriented by a positive vision of the future—one powerful enough to promise some relief from ontological insecurity by inspiring hope in new ways of being in the world. Here, people are motivated by the anxious present to discover a future in the motivating structures latent in the lifeworld past. This, in turn, could strengthen their ability to become even more motivated by the problem at hand, and vice-versa, until some livable equilibrium is achieved. Once collective motivations come into relation by finding their ballast in lived experience, motivated negativity and motivating positivity come to require one another in a dialectic of progressively finding the solution in the problem and the problem in the solution. The big question with respect to climate change, then, is precisely how to find this existential ballast in various lifeworld communities and bring these deeply historical motives into productive relation. How can collectives learn to become “actively situated” by the

existential implications of climate change such that a productive tension takes hold in that ambiguous space between motivated negativity and motivating positivity?

The first answer to this question, I suggest, is that a “thinkable” climate justice movement is needed that has “learned history”—a movement for systemic transition that can help us all become historically situated by the totalizing implications of climate change. I have argued in this section that many in the industrialized world today are underwhelmed and overwhelmed by the historic figure of climate change in ways that generally speak to the French and German situations. This is true in several respects and to varying degrees depending on the internal history lived in the background of different lifeworld communities, the political/ideological winds of external history common between them, and the vagaries of collective experience reducible to neither. Becoming actively situated by the implications of climate change requires learning history in this broad sense.

The “external absurdity” of climate change, however, not only situates collective existence historically but materially as well. I have suggested sporadically throughout the dissertation that the existential problem is in some ways specific to socio-cultural differences in lifeworld background while in other respects it is irreducible to these differences. On the one hand, the climate situation implicates historically-situated social relations such that different lifeworld communities relate to the system responsible for climate change in different ways, particularly with respect to structures of institutionalized power. In some sense, however, the material implications of a destabilizing climate do indeed concern “human” relations to “non-human” nature. The point here isn’t that everyone living in the industrialized world is equally implicated in

causing climate change or that the effects will be universally felt (for neither is true). The point, rather, is that virtually everybody in industrial modernity *lives* the domination of nature at some level and to some degree simply by existing in a world that is scientifically, technologically, and economically premised on rendering material nature serviceable to anthropocentric ends lived in common. Whether they personally like it or not, and regardless of whether they historically benefit from this arrangement compared to others, everyone who buys their food from the grocery store, walks on pavement, and flushes the toilet depends on the system of commodity production that makes the material basis of co-existence possible. To this extent, we all identify with the system at this deeply embodied level. The implication here is that a critical phenomenology of climate response must not only “learn history” with a sensitivity to lifeworld differences in socio-cultural background and power, but also “learn nature” in ways that implicate but aren’t reducible to these differences. Along these lines, the next two sections on *becoming actively situated* by the climate issue distinguish between the “historical figure” of the climate situation where social relations influence differences in system-identification and the “material figure” of this situation where socio-ecological relations influence more diffuse forms of system-identification.

### ***Becoming Actively Situated by the Historical Figure of Climate Change***

What does it mean to “learn history” in a climate age that is both underwhelming and overwhelming? Let us hope that the emergence of radical climate movements over the past decade have made strides in becoming “actively situated” by the hard realities of institutional failure, and that positive visions of climate justice have been growing

momentum to help facilitate this process. Should a vision, or family of visions, find enough confirmation (through personal reflection, interpersonal dialogue, collective political action following some breakthrough event), an intersubjective gestalt shift could take hold in the background of lifeworld experience in which these visions acquire enough motivating pull to politically realize a new future.

If, as I contend, setting the stage for a gestalt shift (in a motivated-motivating process of ethico-political reflexivity) can be described as people becoming “actively situated” by the climate situation, it could be said that existence *after* this lifeworld transition involves “passively situating” themselves to it. Those identifying as consumers, for example, don’t actively reflect and discuss visions of the good life and good society before situating themselves towards material utopia. Rather, they were encultured into a world that tacitly speaks of a gestalt shift from the old order to the new that occurred in the past. So while it’s true that every purchase and career advancement is a somewhat conscious performance and does indeed involve “actively situating” oneself at the *foreground* level of the immediate situation, the normative ends routinely prompting one’s involvements these situations in the first place were passively structured at the background level of the historical or socio-cultural situation.

As Dreyfus said, moreover, gestalt shifts don’t just happen *by* you—they also happen *to* you. And similarly with Marx (1978, 595), we know that human beings create history, but not exactly as they wish. This is precisely because all transitions are inherently situated, and all situations with the potential to transition are inherently ambiguous. So we could certainly say (in hindsight) that the meaningful connections between past, present, and future leading to gestalt shifts in history were prepared by

intentional activity, but the positive vision that finally accomplishes this feat is an indirect result of this. Depending on circumstances relating each motive, history is as contingent and unintentional as it is logical and intentional. Yet, once the socio-cultural inertia of new visions of the future emerge from the contingent thickness of collective existence to acquire a motivating weight of its own, what was once historically *situated* for the most part shifts to become historically *situating*. At some point, as intersubjective and historical beings, we are passively swept up to some degree by an inertia that was once actively intended and cultivated but has now become the normative background against which one's actions find their meaning and justification.<sup>140</sup>

At this stage of climate response, however, the majority of us still live in a world in which climate change has yet to take place in that ambiguous region between the background and foreground levels of lifeworld experience. That is, we have yet to achieve climate ambiguity, as expressed by the hard medicine realists on one side centered on being *passively situated* by the climate problem in the clear light of science, and on the other by positive vision culturalists focused on people *actively situating* themselves to the climate solutions they find moving. Between these unambiguous and thus abyssal extremes, the critical question today is how to become conscious of (and

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<sup>140</sup> It's worth reiterating here that a lifeworld transition to climate consciousness wouldn't make systemic transition inevitable (just as class consciousness doesn't ensure labor unions or a Proletarian Revolution). It is a necessary but insufficient motive for collective political action. But should climate (or class) consciousness reach a critical mass under the right circumstances, the burden of proof is more likely to shift ideologically in favor of the problem itself (as opposed to, at best, the economic, political, or existential *implications* of the problem should they be taken seriously). So, for instance, addressing systemic environmental problems like climate change and systemic social problems like economic exploitation wouldn't have to be justified against the normative "common sense" imperatives for economic growth, say, or socio-historical development, consumer standards of living, and so on. Instead, the latter—including economic policy, scientific research, technological innovation, economic policies, education, jurisprudence, etc.—would *themselves* have to be justified by the new standards of whether or not they ultimately serve the commonly-sensed imperatives for climate justice.

thus actively situated by) the historical and material implications of the climate issue in light of visionary ideals for climate justice *en route* to the socio-cultural gestalt shift in lifeworld existence.<sup>141</sup>

It is in this general context that I read Merleau-Ponty's call to learn history as a "thinkable" process of becoming actively situated to the ambiguities of the political landscape where the dialectics of transition might take hold. And it's in this context, moreover, that I read his political philosophy as a critical phenomenology that's uniquely relevant to the existential problem of climate response. A thinkable politics conducive to becoming actively situated by the historic figure of climate change will remain essential as long as people are underwhelmed and/or overwhelmed by this issue. After all, for some, the systemic implications of climate change are too distant and unfamiliar. Belonging to the world of thought as one abstract talking point among others, the problem carries little existential weight. Like the prewar French, collective existence set in operation by the socio-cultural past might sail right through the ether of political democracy by treating the climate problem as one special-interest issue among others ("not my thing"). Or at best, perhaps, underwhelming perceptions of the climate issue lend themselves to an optimistic faith in quick and easy solutions that are out of touch with the problem. By contrast, for others (or other parts of us), these implications are too close for comfort. The German Parisians immediately understood the existential implications for them if news of Hitler's inhumanity proved correct, and they reacted

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<sup>141</sup> Once fully realized via systemic transition, this would be experienced as "passively situating" by future generations equipped with projects to heal the wounds of the past while striving for social and socio-ecological relations of mutual flourishing. In the final section of this chapter before the conclusion, I draw on Merchant and Plumwood to advance a lifeworld project (or what Merleau-Ponty calls a "total intention" introduced in this section) of "dialogical partnership" as a positive vision of mutual flourishing oriented towards healthy social and socio-ecological relationships.

sharply in literal denial to protect themselves. Similarly, to the extent that some secretly perceive the existential significance of climate change as a profoundly systemic problem when all they really know about life is tied to this system, one may feel compelled to actively escape the figure of climate change by retreating to the background for safety. If circumstances allow it, they might get away with distracting themselves in projects of willful ignorance. But if climate news keeps pouring in and people around them keep the issue alive, and especially if one is pressed to respond before they're ready, they might need to forcefully rationalize their escapism by contriving "good reasons" for inaction. If they can convince others, they can convince themselves (and vice-versa).

Apart from extreme cases on the margins (blithe ignorance or the reactionary armor of self-defense), I suspect that many struggle to make sense of the implications of climate change in some ways and find themselves unwilling to do so in others. Perhaps people passively sail when prevailing winds are strong enough to move life comfortably forward but can also resort to motor power when strong gales blow in the wrong direction. And yet, another possibility exists that, as I've implied on occasion throughout the dissertation, is essential to the existential problem but has yet to be thematized. Perhaps some are neither underwhelmed nor overwhelmed by the systemic implications of climate change precisely because they *already* feel historically situated by the system responsible for this problem. For those historically marginalized by the same system of unjust institutions that also happens to be historically responsible for climate change, "learning history" might mean something quite different from privileged demographics

that find themselves supported by the system and tend to identify with it accordingly.<sup>142</sup> To the extent that the former are, by predisposition, neither underwhelmed nor overwhelmed by the systemic nature of climate change, the task at hand might mean connecting the dots between the systemic injustices already suffered in lived experience and the systemic implications of climate change that risk further suffering. This task might involve some reflexive jumps along the way, since the connections between unjust social relations and unsustainable socio-ecological relations are not obvious. But compared to their historically-privileged counterparts confronting the seemingly unbridgeable lifeworld conditions inhibiting transition, perhaps some would merely encounter a “gap” rather than an abyss on their way to a thinkable politics of climate justice. In any case, the larger point to be made here is that the politics of learning history requires an acute sensitivity to socio-cultural difference in the way various communities historically relate to the system driving climate change.

Historically-rooted socio-cultural differences in the structural power relations influencing system identification certainly inform different perceptions of climate change as a systemic issue. But paralleling lifeworld existence itself, system-identification is complex and multi-layered. We cannot fall into the subtle traps of monological reductivism that force a choice between focusing on either socio-cultural difference or identity, heterogeneity or homogeneity. Depending on context, there are ways in which people in the industrialized world relate to the system differently and there are ways in which they relate to it similarly. Regarding the latter, for instance, comprehensive ways

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<sup>142</sup> Research on the influence structural power differences have on patterns of climate denial is discussed in chapter three on pages 130-131.

of learning history are possible that, if Merleau-Ponty is right, can account for structural differences (in ideology, nationality, religion, and power relations vis-à-vis class, race, gender, for instance), but aren't reducible to these differences. Without relying on any fixed notions of human nature and the like, this broader understanding of historical existence requires an ability to comprehend what he calls the "total intention" of a given civilization or era that subtends socio-cultural differences at some of the most general levels of lifeworld existence.

Whether it is a question of the perceived thing, an historical event, or a doctrine, to "understand" is to grasp the total intention – not merely what these things are for representation, namely, the "properties" of the perceived thing, the myriad of "historical events," and the "ideas" introduced by the doctrine – but rather the unique manner of existing expressed in the properties of the pebble, the glass, or the piece of wax, in all of the events of a revolution, and in all of the thoughts of a philosopher. For each civilization, it is a question of uncovering the Idea in the Hegelian sense...the unique formula of behavior toward others, Nature, time, and death; that is, a certain manner of articulating the world...Must history be understood through ideology, through politics, through religion, or through the economy?...We must in fact understand in all of these ways at once; everything has a sense, and we uncover the same ontological structure beneath all of these relations...As Marx said, history does not walk on its head; but neither does it think with its feet. Or better, it is not for us to worry about either its "head" or its "feet," but rather its body. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxxii-lxxxiii)

The language in this passage is perhaps too sweeping in philosophic implication to avoid reasonable suspicion today. And the same is true to the extent that the lifeworld phenomenology offered in chapter three—of nature and the human relation to it understood as a socio-cultural project of domination—can be read as a total intention in this sense. But in focusing on the multi-layered "body" of lifeworld existence, there is always room for the nuance needed to grapple with historical and material generalities when appropriate without smoothing over specificity. Consider first, for example, the relation between individuals and the social groups that they identify with. We know from

research findings that it is statistically likely that one's attitude towards climate change is influenced by the extent to which individuals intersubjectively identify as, say, conservative, as white, as male, as Christian, as American, as middle class, or some combination thereof (Kahan et al. 2007; McCright and Dunlap 2011). Of course, one could very well identify with all of these categories and nevertheless be deeply concerned about the systemic realities of climate change—or they might identify with none of them and vehemently deny its reality or significance. And people can agree with those they identify with on some things and disagree with them on others. Regardless of these intersubjective vectors, moreover, some individuals might be persuaded that climate change is a concerning problem in some years but not in others depending on the political atmosphere of public opinion at the time. Thanks to the contingencies and ambiguities unique to personal and collective experience, the authentic freedom to overcome socialization and enculturation can always find expression in ways large and small, surprising and unsurprising. Granting important qualifications like these, however, it nevertheless remains true that freedom is always intersubjectively situated by historical and material conditions felt in common. This explains why, as the evidence suggests, there are indeed *general tendencies* of climate denial discernable along lines of institutionalized power where the motivating forces (internal history) of socio-cultural hegemony are felt in common with others.

But, of course, if the language of intersubjectivity generalizes personal life against what Merleau-Ponty calls the “anonymous” background of co-existence, his language of “the unique formula of behavior toward others, Nature, time, and death” characteristic of “each civilization” is far more generalizing still. Here, it seems, intersubjectivity finds its

deepest roots.<sup>143</sup> Particularly in the wake of the cultural turn, however, we have to carefully ask if there are indeed ways of responsibly treating the historical and material conditions basic to “industrial civilization” in ways that are irreducible to intersubjective difference. Is it possible, for instance, to speak of a “total intention” that is at once driving climate change as a material phenomenon and climate denial as an historical phenomenon? More to the point, are there ways in which virtually everybody living in the industrialized world identifies with the system of institutions responsible for climate change at some level of embodied intersubjectivity? And if so, when is it appropriate to focus specifically on socio-cultural differences in relation to the climate issue and when is appropriate to consider more broadly the total intention of lifeworld existence common across these differences?

Addressing these fraught questions effectively, I suggest, requires a clarifying distinction between relating to climate change as an historical phenomenon and relating to it as a material phenomenon. Coming to terms with this distinction is essential to developing a critical phenomenology of climate consciousness—of working through

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<sup>143</sup> Perhaps we can speculate on the ways in which people in the Western and Eastern worlds living in similarly “advanced” capitalist societies today can relate more intuitively to each other’s existence (both regulated via structured of mass production and consumption) than they can to their *own* pasts. For instance, despite vast differences in cultural history, geographical location, language, etc., it may seem easier for people with deep family roots living in London to envision themselves living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Tokyo than to envision living in 15<sup>th</sup> century London (where the River Thames still flowed and everyone spoke discernable English). Likewise in reverse for many residents of Tokyo today, a life in 21<sup>st</sup> century London might make more sense in many ways than a life in 15<sup>th</sup> century Tokyo (called Edo at this time). What makes the 21<sup>st</sup> century different in each case from the 15<sup>th</sup> century concerns, among other things, the basic way people relate to nature (and each other) in capitalist societies, where the nonhuman world is generally intended to serve the human world (see the next section). I wouldn’t conclude from this comparison that the “total intention” of people in London and Tokyo are identical (even for those of the same class and gender), since the cultural history that distinguishes them is just as significant as economic existence. The concept of a total intention is necessarily vague (otherwise, we would have to understand history unambiguously as either walking on its head or thinking with its feet). Nevertheless, I hope this comparison at least intimates the general scope of embodied lifeworld experience that Merleau-Ponty gestures toward with this term.

underwhelming and overwhelming perceptions of climate change by becoming actively situated by the ambiguous figure of this pressing issue in preparation for a transition in lifeworld and ultimately systemic existence. In what follows, then, I continue analyzing the differing relations of motivation at play with respect to becoming *historically* situated by the climate issue along lines of institutionalized power in this section, and then contrast this in the next to the more general relations of motivation required to become *materially* situated by the climate phenomenon.

Beginning with climate change as an historical phenomenon, recall the kernel of truth basic to the positive vision stance that the significance of this issue situates different communities differently. Insofar as climate change was “manufactured in a crucible of inequality,” as Cuomo (2011, 693) put it, socio-cultural differences in power relations are particularly important factors influencing the extent to which one feels historically situated—and thus motivated—by this systemic problem. As I’ve suggested, those that tend to be historically privileged by the system seem especially likely to be underwhelmed and/or overwhelmed by the systemic implications of climate change. Over time, perhaps, reflection and dialogue in good faith could reveal that the very system affording their privilege is in fact responsible for the climate problem, with the implication that their own socio-cultural identity lies at the heart of this systemic issue. Breaking the self-serving spell of reification would mean coming to terms with climate change as a profound lifeworld contingency (of external history). On this basis, our hypothetical subjects could very well learn with others to consciously reflect on the inherited norms, values, ideas, and practices they live by. For those with the wherewithal to answer the call of our time, the figure of climate change has the potential to bring the

socio-cultural landscape of background assumptions to the forefront for reevaluation with others of good faith and in a similar position. Should reflection and dialogue reveal the highly contingent history of one's intersubjective identity (with the implication that it is therefore subject to deep changes in response to deep problems), spaces of freedom could emerge in the form of a gestalt shift. This is certainly conceivable, particularly when considering the educational resources, material security, and time available to privileged demographics. Reflective individuals in this position suffering from the moral or spiritual bankruptcy of consumer capitalism, moreover, may be hungry for more durable and fulfilling sources of meaning to dedicate their lives to, and the existential task of climate response is certainly ripe for grounding "ultimate concern."

Yet, compared to those that feel marginalized by the system, perhaps the chances of this occurring on purely moral grounds are not promising if making this ultimate decision risks an existential identity crisis. As I've argued, facing the systemic implications of the climate issue as, say, an unanticipated consequence of capitalist modernity, one might very well be "externally motivated" to protect rather than work through lifeworld identity. In many circles, moreover, fears of social or political backlash can be far more tangible than any promises of ethical conversion following such a leap of faith. With attention to the relations of motivation at play, it is likely that the motivating pull of internal history will be strong, and this inertia would have to be reoriented—deconstructed and reconstructed—to open up spaces for confronting systemic climate change as the ultimate contingency of external history. For privileged communities open to this possibility, this process might include disclosing the insidious underbelly of consumerism by linking climate change to systemic injustices and the threat of socio-

ecological devastation, in addition to the range of systemic problems hitting closer to home. Sometimes captured by the term “influenza,” these systemic problems speak to declining rates of wellbeing in consumerist societies overall, as expressed in rising “civilization diseases” like stress and eating disorders, cancer risks, disintegrating social and family bonds, anxieties about alienation and nihilism, shrinking leisure time and spaces for solitude, and other maladies and insecurities pervasive in affluent populations. To the extent that inroads to confronting these problems can be found by linking them to the cause of climate justice, even highly privileged groups might find themselves critically motivated to become conscious of the socio-cultural landscape they live by.

Despite all of my qualifications, however, it still has to be said that the probability of climate consciousness occurring to this degree in highly privileged communities is probably comparable to the chance successful capitalists have of becoming class conscious in response to the structural oppression suffered by the working class they exploit to make it the next quarterly report. Insofar as those historically marginalized by the system aren't as predisposed to identify with it as strongly as their privileged counterparts, the historical relations of motivation in the face of systemic climate change are likely to be different in each case. Again, this is particularly true to the extent that the former *already* feel motivated (at least tacitly) to critically question and challenge the status quo. The systemic injustices suffered in everyday existence could mean that their historical situation is more problematic than supportive—even if, like Merleau-Ponty's worker, this is only vaguely sensed in life and held in tension with other deep needs (e.g., to cling to what little security one has and perhaps keep themselves from unraveling under the enduring stresses of everyday life). One's general attitude towards the system

might therefore be more ambiguous in this existential situation—it might be a kind of secret lived in latency, a quasi-unconscious discontent that must be humored to get through the day. Merleau-Ponty’s factory worker, for instance, might cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally identify with the economic system that they depend on for material security, but is also in a position to slowly and then decisively break these tenuous bonds under the right circumstances. From this perspective, then, the existential gap between unjust social relations and unsustainable socio-ecological relations might not be so impassable, since both sides can be bridged by recognizing the larger historic logic of domineering relations to the world common to each.<sup>144</sup>

The upshot here is that, compared to people born with the socio-cultural winds at their back, those that feel that the system is somehow leveled against them might need to *strengthen*, not overcome, their living inclinations. We can thus imagine several variations of the kind of “molecular process” leading to climate consciousness at the grassroots level that Merleau-Ponty illustrated with the worker who lived oppression but needed the right experiences to connect the dots and envision possibilities for moving forward. Learning history in this regard, might involve fostering a “sociological imagination,” which C. Wright Mills (1959, 5, 7) defines as an “awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society” (although, in the climate case, we might expand this to include collective, not just personal, experience). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s critical phenomenology of class consciousness could easily be read as an exercise in the sociological imagination. Learning about the historical evolution of

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<sup>144</sup>This socio-cultural project, introduced in chapter three, is revisited in the final section of this chapter as the total intention of industrial modernity essential to the existential problem (of ethical denial and political transition) that must ultimately be overcome in light of an alternative project.

socio-cultural existence beyond reified meta-narratives, moreover, could expand one's grasp of the sociological landscape situating lifeworld experience, and in particular one's relation to the regimes of power responsible for the systemic problems affecting them and others directly and indirectly. Like experiencing other societies and cultures living across the globe or those "invisible" Others living closer to home like Native Americans in the United States, studying one's socio-cultural past has a way of externalizing or decentering lived experience to create spaces for learning. As one discovers that the normative structures of everyday life they live by are themselves the products of a deeply contingent history, what was once sedimented in the unconscious backgrounded might come to the fore as the figure. A cultural study of, say, Western religion, philosophy, and the arts going back to antiquity sheds light on ways of thinking and feeling operative today, just as a social study of the long and tortuous development of economic, political, technological, and legal institutions can shed light on the dominant structures of practical behavior still in motion. By looking from within and from without to expand the historical horizons of lifeworld experience in this way, some people might innovate the lifeworld space they need to dislodge their sedimented identification with problematic regimes. Others, by contrast, might find themselves in a space to more fully bring existing discontents with the structures of power to consciousness. In this respect, becoming climate conscious entails learning to carefully perceive the variegated historical landscape of collective identity situating one's lifeworld relation to the system in ways common with some and uncommon with others.

In the final analysis, however, the prospects of this bottom-up response happening on a mass scale still seems unlikely, *even* for those historically motivated in some

respects to challenge the system responsible for climate change. For one thing, the general logic of climate justice in the industrialized world remains quite abstract in most situations, and this complicates motivation even for those already experiencing ambiguous feelings about existing institutions. Unlike the palpable situation experienced by sustenance farmers in India and Africa facing chronic drought like nothing they've ever known or indigenous peoples in the arctic confronting early snow melts that make hunting more difficult every year, the fact that those suffering the first and worst consequences of climate change are the least responsible for it isn't obvious for those living in industrial society. Connecting the dots between social and socio-ecological domination in truly moving ways, moreover, certainly challenges reflection and dialogue. More generally, the socio-cultural space of lived experience needed to facilitate these connections remains nascent at best. Unlike the world of proletarian politics in Merleau-Ponty's time where motivating spaces for class consciousness had *already* been largely achieved in prior decades by Marxist theorists, organizers, and the labor movement more generally, the climate justice movement today is young (perhaps not unlike the labor movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century not long after the Industrial Revolution). Although momentum is rapidly growing,<sup>145</sup> the socio-cultural presence or motivating force of these grassroots movements likely remain too weak and marginal in most communities to provide viable spaces for climate consciousness to emerge on the scale required.

But the most general challenge subtending these worries, in my view, concerns the “total intention” of material existence in the industrialized world. Despite differences

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<sup>145</sup> See Naomi Klein's (2014) chapter “Blockadia” in *This Changed Everything* for an overview of this growing momentum.

in the historical landscape of political motivation, I submit, privileged and marginalized groups alike do not feel *materially* situated by climate change enough to fully motivate the lifeworld transition essential to systemic transition. A thinkable politics of climate response, or a consciousness fully motivated by the ambiguous figure of climate change, requires being historically *and* materially situated without being underwhelmed or overwhelmed by it.

### ***Becoming Actively Situated by the Material Figure of Climate Change***

I have suggested that, especially for marginalized groups living under the weight of oppressive institutions, the potential for climate consciousness is aided to the extent that the very system responsible for unjust social conditions is also responsible for unsustainable socio-ecological conditions. Nevertheless, there is an existential difference between feeling historically situated to others as a social and cultural being (e.g., via unjust institutions) and feeling materially situated to nature as a *human* being by the realities of climate change. The existential problem analyzed in chapter three largely considered the historic implications of climate change as a threat to socio-cultural identity and ontological security, particularly for privileged groups that exemplify this lifeworld conflict more acutely. The material implications of climate change, however, deepen the existential problem to the extent that they speak to the geophysical and ecological conditions of human existence (and planetary life in general) in ways irreducible to socio-cultural or institutionalized power differences. Indeed, in addition to “learning history,” I argue in this section that a thinkable politics of becoming actively situated by the figure of climate change (and other problems categorized as environmental) has to be expanded

to include “learning nature”—a challenge that more generally implicates privileged and marginalized lifeworld communities alike. Turning now to the material implications of climate change, what more exactly justifies treating socio-ecological relations—as a total intention—more generally than socio-historical relations?

Compared to the diversity of responses to systemic climate change as an historical phenomenon, one’s relation to this issue as a material phenomenon is mediated more diffusely by economic institutions structuring social relations to nature.<sup>146</sup> In this respect, I argue, the relatively controversial notion of a total intention at the most general levels of lifeworld existence in the industrialized world makes more sense. This level of generality is implied in Merleau-Ponty’s largely economic conception mentioned earlier of “the motivating force of the dialectic” as human existence “involved in a certain way of appropriating nature in which the mode of [one’s] relationship with others take shape.”

To address the material question of socio-ecological relations more specifically in terms of lifeworld experience, let us revisit the genealogical analysis offered in chapter three of human dominion over nature as a socio-cultural project broadly organizing industrial modernity.<sup>147</sup> Grappling with the economic structures of industrial capitalism as a socio-cultural project, it could now be suggested that the material needs of human

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<sup>146</sup> The economy, of course, also structures social relations. However, in contrast to the politics of social relations where historical tendencies in the background factor in more strongly, the economics of how class, gender, and international relations are structured largely rest on the appropriation of nature to accumulate wealth and meet the growth imperative essential to capitalism—escalating what Allan Schnaiberg (Schnaiberg, Pellow, and Weinberg 2002) has called the “treadmill of production.”

<sup>147</sup> Although I focus on industrial capitalism, it’s worth noting that “industrial modernity” is broader in implication and includes the industrial communism practiced by the USSR and China. The spirit of industrialism arguably has deeper cultural roots in Western history (particularly in England where the Industrial Revolution first emerged, home of Francis Bacon’s dream of technocratic society, the steam engine, history’s largest colonial empire, etc.). But the dream of human (and social) dominion, or what Naomi Klein calls “extractivism,” is common to both.

existence are largely procured in the form of a *total intention* to dominate or humanize nature. That is, socio-cultural relations to nature are economically structured to accelerate the exploitation of “natural resources” without institutionalized limits. Hence, just as liberalism mystifies the politics of social relations under the assumption that egocentric individuals are essentially free to situate *themselves* to the world of others, anthropocentric industrialism similarly mystifies social relations to non-human nature. In particular, for the past few centuries the organizing principles of capitalism have institutionalized the assumption that nature is a “free gift” for endless production and consumption (Foster 2000, 167) and the tenets of science have institutionalized the assumption that nature is transparent to human reason. Assuming that nature itself can be brought under rational control and that it is free for the taking, the meaning of technology as a human tool embodies the perception that physical power over nature can be harnessed to progress humanity towards material utopia. Arguably, the common lifeworld denominator summing up this grand illusion is that human societies—once “developed” via capitalism, science, and technology—can situate their *own* relation to nature.

Arguably, the underbelly of this total intention marks a kind of existential alienation from nonhuman nature (expressed in exaggerated drives for constant desire-fulfillment, convenience, novelty, ambitions to transcend embodiment and circumstance, etc.).<sup>148</sup> Material culture in industrial societies has become thoroughly commodified, meaning human relations to nature are predominantly mediated and reified by market

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<sup>148</sup> Indeed, John Bellamy Foster (2000, ix) relates the young Marx’s theory of alienation with his material analysis of soil depletion under capitalism later on under the concept of “metabolic rift,” which he describes as “Marx’s mature analysis of the alienation of nature.”

forces largely beyond the purview of everyday experience. With the globalization of mass production and consumption and the diffusion of scientific technologies of mass communication, transportation, and so on, social relations to nature—to food, land, water, and indeed the climate—are systemically determined by exchange values far more than by use values, let alone any spiritual or cultural values of symbolic meaning. Particularly with the advent of consumerism as a cultural force, normative visions of the good life and good society are inextricably tied to this growing commodification of nature.<sup>149</sup>

Insofar as this anthropocentric project roundly (but not homogenously) implicates different lifeworld communities in a more-or-less common venture, I would suggest that many in the industrialized world embody an exaggerated sense of *human invulnerability* to climate change as a material reality impinging, not just on their social lives, but on life itself. In important respects, the tripartite forces of industrial modernity—science, technology, and capitalism—have reinforced an intergenerational and even cross-cultural sense of human control to a degree unfathomable in previous eras. Existing in, or aspiring towards, a world built and seemingly destined to service “human” intentionality as such (unburdened by material conditions or wild natural forces beyond our species’ grasp and influence), means that people live the domination of nature as industrialized beings—even if, for some, this notion of being implicated in worldly domination seems repugnant once stated out loud.

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<sup>149</sup> The commodification of nature isn’t explicitly limited to the ends of consumer capitalism. This is revealed in the widespread use of economic metaphors constructing various discourses. The science of ecology, for instance, divides “producers” from “consumers” to explain *eco-systems* (indeed, before the word “ecology” was coined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the “economy of nature” was a common reference). Pragmatic conservationists, to take another example, might employ the economic language of “ecosystem services” to justify conserving nature (e.g., the “free” pollinating services offered to industrial agriculture by bees might be calculated to argue for certain pesticide regulations).

At this general level and without presuming simplistic uniformity,<sup>150</sup> then, I would argue that captains of industry and workers (blue collar or white), men and women, whites and people of color, and the industrialized nations of the global North and South all tend to embody the material commodification of nature as a total intention to control nature for human ends. The motivating inertia of this total intention certainly doesn't erase the significance of socio-cultural differences, but it isn't entirely reducible to them either. Simply by existing in the everyday world bequeathed by scientific, technological, and capitalist modernity, there is an extent to which by necessity even marginalized groups live the domination of nature constructed over generations—not only for elite ends in particular but for human ends in general. In important respects, this point extends to living the domination of *human others* as well, as when the first-world poor find economic relief in retail stores like Walmart where goods are made affordable thanks to cheap labor markets in China and elsewhere. Indeed, when one considers the immense environmental devastation that comes with the globalization of labor exploitation (where corporations not only chase down the most desperate people but also

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<sup>150</sup> That is, without reducing the historical figure of the climate issue where socio-cultural differences and power relations are most significant to the material figure of climate change where these differences aren't as pronounced. As I discuss further below along these lines, my analytic distinction between "learning history" and "learning nature" is intended to clarify the significance of power and socio-cultural difference (and thus better evaluate where this is more relevant and where it is less so). But these distinct tasks are *always* intertwined in expression. It is naïve to think that one can understand material socio-ecological relations "objectively" without considering the historicity of one's cultural background and social position. My point, however, is that it's also problematic to assume in reverse that one's initial socio-cultural perspective determines their conclusions irrespective of the material facts of the given situation encountered across background differences.

countries with no environmental regulations), the domination of nature and people are systemically interlaced in ways that implicate the privileged and marginalized alike.<sup>151</sup>

Socio-economics aside, the “atmosphere of generality” in which different groups live social and socio-ecological domination also finds cultural expression. If we understand consumerism, not just materially in terms of consumption volumes or economic throughput but in terms of lifeworld *aspirations* for scientific and technological “progress” or economic “success” (as defined by anthropocentric assumptions about the good life, nature, and the human relationship to nature, etc.), it seems apparent that this total intention is embodied across historical differences in socio-cultural identity. Indeed, to a considerable extent, social differences in power relations are often felt most strongly against this largely shared anthropocentric background. Although powerful movements for justice have emerged on the premise that oppression violates human dignity and wellbeing in some deep sense, it could also be argued that many in the consumer age experience injustice or powerlessness as unfair barriers to the good life of material prosperity that they, as human beings in a liberal society, should *also* have the full opportunity to enjoy. Hence, even for marginalized groups already historically situated by the same system responsible for climate change, motivating climate consciousness arguably requires more traction than “learning history” alone affords.

Despite my sweeping language here, however, I am not suggesting that socio-ecological relations can be understood independently of social relations or institutionalized power differences. As ecofeminists like Merchant and Plumwood have

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<sup>151</sup> Albeit, not uniformly and certainly not in ways that neutralize culpability, since the “haves” actively benefit from systemic domination while the “have-nots” tend to be forced by necessity to live systemic domination.

argued, and Beauvoir and the Frankfurt School before them, the logic of human dominion over nature is inextricably tied to projects of social dominion over others. Recalling the research by Kirsti Jylhä and Nazar Akrami mentioned in chapter three linking “social dominance orientation” to climate denial, differences in social/power relations do indeed appear to influence attitudes towards socio-ecological relations at some level. So the proposition that a total intention to dominate nature constitutes a “common” barrier to climate agency isn’t meant to neutralize social identity or absorb the heterogeneity of historical barriers to action. In the final analysis, the socio-cultural pull of the project of human dominion can never be divorced from structural differences in social relations. To reiterate, my point is that in some contexts and to some degree there are relatively general ways of talking about climate change that aren’t reducible to socio-cultural or power relations. Put otherwise, the existential problem of collectivizing action on climate change requires learning history *and* learning nature as intertwined yet distinct tasks. When considering the material significance of industrialism and consumerism vis-à-vis disruptions in the carbon, nitrogen, and hydrological cycles, for instance, and particularly the geophysical time-lag between the causes and effects of climate change (discussed below), the highly generalized language of nature, humanity, life, and even total intentions is indispensable.

With the possible exception of indigenous peoples and traditional subsistence farmers living off the land, say, or those in parts of the world where climate change has already “taken place” as if by occupation, even marginalized groups living in the humanized world bequeathed by industrial capitalism might (like their privileged counterparts) not feel truly vulnerable to material forces beyond the everydayness of

industrial existence. If this is true, a sweeping lifeworld shift across socio-cultural differences will be needed at some background level to truly feel the material weight of climate change in common. That is, whether learning history means overcoming one's privileged identification with the system causing climate change or accepting and strengthening one's discontents of it, it can be argued that learning nature is a relatively common venture that to an extent justifies the rather universalizing language implied by this task. Hence, in addition to the motivating significance of lifeworld anxiety (i.e., between underwhelming and overwhelming perception of climate change), there is something valuable in hard medicine realism missed by their positive vision critics. Even if Hulme, Swyngedouw, and Manchin are correct to point out the psychological and political risks that come with the abuses of scientism (and the metaphysical tradition behind it), trading the language of human relations to nature for cultural constructions of nature minimizes the materiality of socio-ecological relations implicating virtually everybody in the industrialized world today in one way or another. We can acknowledge with these critics that the transcultural project of scientific objectivity can be philosophically naïve and insufficient to fully motivate collective action while rejecting any cultural logic that dismisses the necessity of scientific materialism on these grounds.

Positive cultural visions are essential, but they must be equipped to *take up* the hard realities of climate change, and this involves learning about the material processes of nonhuman nature. The question is how to do this productively and responsibly. To the extent that climate change is an historically unintended consequence systemic to the lifeworld projects of industrial modernity, questioning the material implications of this issue requires a "big picture" framework to put things into proper context. To be

motivating, however, this framework needs to be normative, and thus cultivated ahead of time before scientific disclosures of climate change are introduced. Hence, just as a sociological imagination is essential to learning history, I would argue that something like a *materialist imagination* is essential to learning nature. Despite problematic traces of scientism, for instance, popularizers like Carl Sagan and Neil deGrasse Tyson offer an accessible and inspiring materialist cosmology that is appropriately suited to grappling with the realities of climate change non-anthropocentrically.<sup>152</sup> Exceling in the art of scientific wonder, they invite people to “zoom out” of the humanized world of everydayness to reflect on the cosmic evolution of galaxies, solar systems, and planet earth, and “zoom in” to engage the equally strange microcosm of microbial, molecular, and quantum phenomena. They do so, moreover, in ways that relate to the everyday realities and concerns of people. For Merleau-Ponty (2012, lxxvii), recall, reflection is born from a sense of wonder that serves to “loosen,” not snap, “the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear”—for this “alone is conscious of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical.” As Heidegger (1994) suggests, moreover, wonder is like anxiety in that both moods affect the most general background levels of being in the world—with the essential difference that the free-play of wonder is an invitation to *open up* horizons from within while unbridled anxiety can shut them down as a signal that lifeworld integrity is being threatened from without. With spatiotemporal horizons of thought and imagination expanded in a mood of wonder, the critical notion that *life itself* requires certain material conditions to emerge

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<sup>152</sup> Perhaps the equivalent in the life sciences is David Attenborough. Indeed, Sagan, Tyson, and Attenborough have all expressed concerns over climate change and have dedicated special attention to it for a popular audience.

and flourish might find meaningful traction in an otherwise deeply anthropocentric way of being. Moreover, considering the fantastic geological—and indeed astronomical—contingencies influencing the dynamic course of these conditions and their influence on episodes of biological flourishing and mass extinction events, we also come to appreciate the *intrinsic vulnerability* of life on this planet. Reflecting on the material conditions for biogenesis to occur and flourish, for instance, and wondering whether life is common throughout the cosmos or rare and perhaps even unique to planet Earth (at least in complex form), could be a powerful exercise that puts the rapid deterioration of the biosphere since the Industrial Revolution into existential perspective.

With respect to climate change more specifically, an ability to consider the consequences of geophysical fluctuations in the carbon cycle—including ice ages, tropical conditions at the poles, sea level fluctuations—could certainly put the implications of this issue into perspective. Against such a materialist background, as opposed to one framed predominantly by narrow economic and political concerns, we find ourselves in a position to seriously worry about the potential consequences of altering the carbon cycle. It's from such an expansive vantage point that we rightly question the narrow wisdom of digging up vast stores of carbon energy accumulated over—and thus out of circulation for—*millions* of years and, in the blink of a geological eye, suddenly dumping it back into the carbon cycle all at once. It's against this background as well, incidentally, that we discover just how implicated climate change is with virtually all other global environmental crises like ocean acidification and deforestation—and ultimately the sixth mass extinction in Earth's 4.5 billion year history.

Learning about the cosmic, geological, climatological, biological, and ecological evolution of life on earth can therefore put the material conditions of human existence in broader context by expanding the spatiotemporal horizons of our being in the world. Doing so affords the traction needed to make sense of the fact that the material causes of climate change—the consumption of commodified nature that occurs simply by living in the local present—have entirely global effects that will last for a very long time. Becoming situated by climate change in this sense, moreover, we might be more motivated to reflect and talk about the global and intergenerational injustices that are also more likely to stand out against this expanded background, in addition to the more ecocentric considerations discussed here. Innovating ways of opening up sociological and materialist imaginaries in wonder can thus help carve out valuable lifeworld space in the background of socio-cultural existence.

Responding to climate change for what it is requires motivation that is commensurate with the material weight of this issue, and this begins with questioning the “climate situation as fact.” The point here isn’t simply that one must be better prepared *conceptually* to make sense of things on this scale, although this indispensable. More significant is an existential openness (cultivated beforehand in wonder) to more freely engage the material world beyond the anthropocentric sensibilities inherited from the cultural past and reinforced in our practical social routines today. For those (or those parts of us) that tend to feel overwhelmed by the daunting implications of climate change, a materialist imagination might afford a more solid grip to help them confidently handle—take up, process, and productively orient—climate anxieties that might otherwise prompt cognitive dissonance or other self-protective measures to escape

responsibility. By contrast, for those feeling underwhelmed by the climate problem, a materialist imagination might help one experience the full weight that comes with a sense of being truly situated by climate change as a transhuman phenomenon—and feel realistically vulnerable to it as such. Insofar as learning nature is essential to bridging the “problem” side of the abyss with the historical landscape of meaningful “solutions,” it is critical to mediating full passage to climate consciousness.

Ultimately, a thinkable politics of climate response requires learning history and nature together, which means we must become actively situated by the historical and material figure of climate change. Yet, compared to the political task of learning history discussed by Merleau-Ponty that involved accurately perceiving and thus anticipating the facts of prewar buildup and responding to them with intention before it’s too late, it would seem that efforts to become actively situated by the material figure of climate change have to be far more intentional. For geophysical (climatological) reasons, that is, existing generations must learn to become situated *well* before climate change “takes place” in our everyday lives (like the war did for France in 1940 when the Nazi’s quickly defeated their army). This is due in particular to the enormous time-lag between the actions causing climate change (emitting carbon, removing carbon sinks, etc.) and the manifest effects of these actions (submerging coastal cities, extreme forms of water scarcity and agricultural failure, etc.).<sup>153</sup> By the time the impacts are palpable enough to *situate* everyday life (thus becoming unmistakably felt as a motivated call to action), the

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<sup>153</sup> According to IPCC reports, CO<sub>2</sub> can stay in the atmosphere in the region of 5 to 200 years. Hence, some of the impacts currently felt can be theoretically traced back to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. As Gardiner (2010, 91) points out, however, fossil fuel carbon in particular has an estimated mean lifetime of 30 to 35 thousand years, according to climate scientist David Archer.

damage will continue its momentous course even if global emissions instantaneously dropped to zero.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, this is the situation that all of humanity is in today after decades of thinly motivated forms of action in conjunction with heavily motivated forms of inaction.

Ironically, perhaps this scientific fact suggests more than anything else that motivating collective action on climate change demands much more than scientific clarity or practical rationality. In this context especially, the spatiotemporal expansion of horizons opened up by sociological and material imaginaries of wonder takes on a surprisingly profound political meaning. I have argued that learning history in the climate case requires learning nature: a politics of systemic transition on the lifeworld stage of history must be partly motivated by the material implications of exacerbating socio-ecological rifts in the metabolism of human relations to nature under industrial capitalism. But considering the seemingly inhuman time-lag essential to the climate situation we face, we must come full circle by turning back to history once again. For as we learn to expand our spatio-temporal horizons and reflect on this time-lag, we can only conclude that “learning nature” also entails what we might call “learning history in the future tense.” The politics of responding to the material figure of climate change requires *historically situating ourselves* well into the future. Only socio-cultural projects informed by positive visions of enormous existential scope and meaning can accomplish such a task—a task traditionally fulfilled by mythical cosmologies that seem to answer the

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<sup>154</sup> The latest IPCC (2018) report states that, to date, global average temperatures have increased .85°C (1.4°F) since the Industrial Revolution (from 1880 to 2012). But even if global emissions immediately ceased, scientists claim that the planet is still “committed” or locked into a further increase of .6°C (1.1°F) in the next 40 years for a total increase of 1.45 °C (2.5 °F) from preindustrial levels before temperatures finally stabilize (Rood 2014).

question of existence “from scratch,” as it were. In light of the historical and material figure of climate change, they must be comprehensive enough to redefine social and socio-ecological relations as a new way of being in the world—a new way that is meaningful enough to inspire long-view projects of socio-cultural change from within.<sup>155</sup>

In the final analysis, I submit, the existential task of climate response demands a *total intention* that is pushed by the right problems and pulled into a visionary future by the right solutions well before climate change “takes place” as if by occupation. Perhaps imaginaries of hope opened up in wonder and intersubjectively confirmed via social learning can help expand spatiotemporal horizons enough to become actively situated by the global and intergeneration “storms” of climate change, as Gardiner puts it. But how do total intentions of this existential scope and depth emerge in history?<sup>156</sup> They certainly don’t spring up *ex nihilo*, but history shows nonetheless that they do in fact emerge. In the next section, I consider Merleau-Ponty’s concept of a “matrix event” as the historic advent of such a total intention (and in the final section I propose an ethico-political ontology of “dialogical partnership” as an alternative to industrial modernity and thus as a model for encouraging such an event). Supposing this socio-cultural gestalt shift from “external” to “internal” history starts materializing deep in the background of lifeworld existence, the hopelessly abstract and seemingly impossible struggle to become “actively situated” by the figure of climate change will transition to become “passively

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<sup>155</sup> Given the spatiotemporal horizons of the climate situation, moreover, these visionary projects would have to prove themselves durable in the absence of immediate confirmation in concrete experience. Perhaps, in this case, confirmation (essential to institutionalizing motivating norms) would largely take the form of social learning.

<sup>156</sup> Like others that have emerged throughout this and preceding chapters, this question is far too big to be addressed justly. This is an unfortunate consequence of the enormous scope or inter-dimensionality of the subject matter of climate response framing the dissertation project.

situating”—and the motivating weight of visionary projects to realize a just and sustainable world will begin taking on a life of their own. But without the germ of a total intention responsive to the totalizing implications of the climate situation waiting on the horizon in the first place, the gestalt shift or lifeworld transition between ethical responsibility and political intentionality isn’t likely to occur. Under these circumstances, the abyss between problem and solution will remain unbridgeable.

*The Advent of Socio-cultural Transition: Passively Situating Ourselves to New Horizons of Climate Justice*

As I’ve argued, a positive vision is needed that is general enough in scope to afford lifeworld traction on systemic problems like climate change while pointing to a truly just and sustainable world that transcends them. Writing in the historical wake of Nazi occupation, a thinkable politics for Merleau-Ponty can be summed up as a call to historically situate political action to the world beyond one’s immediate grasp and influence—so that, by working through pressing ambiguities, the intrinsic meaning and extrinsic consequences of collective action come into productive relation. On his account, an existential politics conscious of the intersubjective landscape one lives by (in relation to others on the map) can better prepare political perception to anticipate and confront historical contingencies. And yet, due in part to the climate time-lag, becoming historically situated by this issue as a material phenomenon requires a far more radical kind of anticipation than the geopolitical example of war suggests.

Ultimately, collective action on climate change requires a total intention for climate justice so powerfully motivating that public demands for systemic change don’t

have to wait to be predominantly problem-driven, situated, or else rely on the “rational” motives of practical action alone. Compared to the largely personal gestalt shifts in perception and class consciousness described earlier in the chapter, here we consider the other end of the spectrum by examining perhaps the most sweeping gestalt shift that can occur in human existence.

In the context of Western history, the gestalt shift from medieval to modern experience seems to mark the kind of dramatic example of lifeworld transition that a critical phenomenology of climate response should consider. Consider the socio-cultural comprehension achieved by medieval Christendom. The historical continuity and inertia centering European existence was—while certainly not unfragmented when studied in academic detail—powerful enough to last over a millennium. By all appearances, the lifeworld comprehension intrinsic to this historical inertia was so momentous that it took centuries before problems systemic to theocratic hegemony could be truly felt in common and addressed as such. Yet, the deep contingencies of external history that inadvertently led to the Reformation, merchant capitalism, Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, and Enlightenment challenged the socio-cultural equilibrium of medieval existence. As the lifeworld threads historically motivating theocratic and feudal hegemony slowly loosened their hold in the face of each problem and contingency, and as the search for new ways of being were pushed by the anxieties of socio-cultural discord and pulled in wonder by new discoveries and opportunities, the historic background of medieval existence was being haphazardly “prepared” for the advent of change.

At a certain point in this molecular process, as the motivating weight of tradition continued making less sense overall and as the general contingencies that have long

motivated the anonymous search for new ways of being continued acquiring a lifeworld consistency and weight of its own, what Merleau-Ponty (2010, 13) calls a “matrix event” became a real possibility. We might understand “matrix” here as the socio-cultural gestalt of lifeworld existence embodied deep in the background of intersubjectivity. When this occurs, the historical relation of motivation between the traditional center of institutionalized existence and the forces for change pushing to decenter these institutions gets reversed, and a new socio-cultural equilibrium emerges in the process of institutionalizing systemic transition. Eventually, the motivated push expressed by a family of struggles reaching into the contingent past to make sense of the larger situation congeal to become the motivating pull of a new future waiting to be realized—so that the figure of these struggles *refigures* the background matrix of cultural assumptions and social practices.

What once *actively situated* coexistence as systemic problems challenging normative lifeworld projects now becomes the historic “solution” *passively situating* lifeworld experience towards new horizons of possibility. “Transcendence,” in something like an Hegelian-Marxian sense, has occurred on a grand scale. As the need to reorient practical existence under liberalism and capitalism were increasingly felt, the cultural past had to be redefined in order to make sense of the trajectory stretching from the lived present to a future newly anticipated in the form of modernity. For example, as capitalism emerged to orient existence towards material “progress” over nature (in contrast to supernatural salvation), the rejected past was reframed as the “Dark Ages” and held responsible accordingly for stunting the rational capacities of human “enlightenment” essential to freedom, prosperity, and happiness. Speaking to what I referred to earlier as

internal history, Merleau-Ponty (2012, xliv-xlv) has said: “History is logical inasmuch as certain ideas have a preestablished affinity with certain politics or interests because each of them presuppose the same conception of man.” From this perspective, if we substitute his “conception of man” language with “human existence,” the felt need to redefine the past could be understood as essential to shifting the motivating “logic” of internal history towards a new future—which means towards new common-sense horizons of aspiration.

At what point, we might wonder, were Europeans generally convinced that there was no turning back to the “dark” or “backwards” past? One might point to the French and American Revolutions as the historic moment when this lifeworld reversal occurred. But Merleau-Ponty more keenly identifies the Industrial Revolution as the culminating event when the socio-cultural matrix defining modernity congealed to find comprehensive expression in lifeworld existence (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 13; Vallier 2005, 293). Hence, from a lifeworld perspective, it was arguably this event in particular that most fully realized what the history of Bourgeois existence had been striving and waiting for all along. Renaissance humanism, Protestant individualism, scientific rationality, economic wealth and materialism, technological and military power, liberal democracy, and other “solutions” to medieval problems and discontents still latent in the background arguably found their socio-cultural comprehension in the lived experience of industrialization. Once these post-medieval traces of past experience (each with their own history) achieved a working affinity with one another and found socio-cultural confirmation in the emerging world of industrial capitalism, only then could they be intersubjectively taken up to shift the socio-cultural equilibrium of lifeworld existence. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the modern “atmosphere of generality” would acquire a

comprehensive style and motivating weight of its own beyond the bourgeoisie that actively labored for generations to achieve this.

So far, however, this macro-level picture of a socio-cultural reversal from the historically ‘motivated’ to the ‘motivating’ might give the impression of a clean and decisive overthrow of the medieval past. Approached from a lifeworld perspective, however, it’s essential to note that this dramatic shift to secular modernity was unconsciously mediated by the lived past despite the conscious efforts of many to overcome it.<sup>157</sup> Christian sensibilities and aspirations were especially important here, even though the problems that motivated change were systemic to the Christian order, either directly or indirectly.<sup>158</sup> This is partly because Christianity, as a vast body of meaning and wisdom, was embodied differently by different lifeworld communities (vis-à-vis differences in geography, generation, institutionalized power, etc.). Hence, although the systemic problems “as fact” motivated critical reinterpretations and reevaluations of Christendom to the extent that they were felt in common, the historic inspirations *motivating* change were nevertheless consistently Christian in meaning. The connection to Christianity is obvious in the case of the Protestant Reformation where one theology

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<sup>157</sup> Marx (1978, 595) articulates this insight clearly in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” when he writes: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they wish; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.”

<sup>158</sup> Particularly in the United States, the structures of the Christian past still find powerful expression today, even for, say, “secular humanists” that consciously refuse to religiously self-identify as Christian. The meaning-structures of modernity, including those embodied in counter-culturalism and political progressivism, all have durable cultural roots in the Christian past. Absent a rational actor theory of human nature and history, one could hardly expect otherwise given its inertia.

was rejected in favor of another. But scholars have also exposed the theological roots motivating the meaning structures of capitalism, technological power, the scientific revolution, the meta-narrative of historical progress, etc.,<sup>159</sup> even though these movements would later assume secular form partly in backlash to theocratic abuses.<sup>160</sup>

Again, change is partly motivated by the figure of a given problem (or family of problems) constituting the historical “situation as fact.” But no matter how systemic the problem may be, inspiring and sustaining collective action on this scale requires traction with comprehensive sources of meaning that can only be found latent in the lifeworld background where the inertia of lived history is strongest. This is why, given the historical background of Medieval Europe, the trace of Christianity had to mediate these movements. Regardless of how pressing systemic problems might have been at the twilight of modernity, explicit proposals for non-Christian “solutions” would have been dismissed as too absurd to entertain. Perceptions of anti-Christian responses, moreover, might certainly have motivated widespread denial of the very problems that people were in fact suffering (not unlike the hypothetical worker in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of

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<sup>159</sup> On the theological roots of capitalism, see Max Weber’s (2002) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. For a seminal analysis of the Christian meaning of technology as it relates to the anthropocentric dominion of nature, see Lynn White Jr.’s (1967) “The Historic Root of Our Ecologic Crisis.” The third chapter of Max Oelschlaeger’s (1991, 68-96) *The Idea of Wilderness* entitled “The Alchemy of Modernism” offers a discussion of the influence of “natural theology” on the scientific revolution. And finally, see Carolyn Merchant’s (2003) *Reinventing Eden* for a cultural analysis of the theological underpinnings of the meta-narrative of human progress over nature as a “recovery narrative” from the Fall from Eden to its recuperation on earth as material utopia.

<sup>160</sup> Indeed, one could go back further into Western history to note that the advent of Christianity itself was mediated by Pagan structures of meaning in its theology and rituals (e.g., holidays). If many early Christians largely envisioned their religion as an alternative to Pagan hegemony (and even a reaction against it), it nevertheless had to find lifeworld traction with existing Pagan sensibilities and practices in order to convert Pagans and ultimately facilitate the matrix event inaugurating Christendom. Paul the Apostle, who was Greek-educated, played a particularly significant role in the Hellenistic world, which arguably speaks to the profound influence of pagan philosophy (Plato in the early Middle Ages and Aristotle later) on Christian theology—as when Nietzsche (1966, 3) claims that “Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people’.”

class consciousness who would have been terrified by the prospects of a Proletarian Revolution had it been proposed too soon). And finally, imposing secular modernity top-down risks violent and self-defeating backlashes that could only be contained by terror, as the experience of the French Revolution suggests.

Now if Merleau-Ponty is right to single out the Industrial Revolution as the matrix event most powerfully situating collective existence today, and if this is indeed the event that largely solidified the total intention for social and socio-ecological dominion driving systemic problems like climate change, the existential depths of the climate situation become clear—along with the need for a critical phenomenology to help find ways of responding to it. All things considered, then, there is reason to believe that an alternative socio-cultural project is needed that is powerful enough to take up and transcend industrial modernity with total intention, just as the latter ultimately took up and transcended medieval theocracy. In the final section below, I return to the works of Merchant and Plumwood to summarily propose an ethico-political ontology of “dialogical partnership” as a positive vision of social and socio-ecological relations. These visionary ecofeminist philosophers are nicely compatible with what might be described as the “dialogical ontology” informing Merleau-Ponty’s political philosophy (Christion 2015). Furthermore, I draw on edifying Native American descriptions of indigenous ways of being in the world that, in my view, exemplify dialogical partnership.

An ethico-ontology of dialogical partnership may be a useful philosophical framework for cultivating a total intention for systemic transition responsive to the totalizing implications of the climate situation. At the very least, it has the virtue of gesturing towards the comprehensive depth and scope required of positive visions at this

point in history if they are to meaningfully prepare the socio-cultural landscape for a matrix event responsive to the systemic problems of industrial modernity that keep mounting.

### ***A Total Intention for Dialogical Partnership***

In my view, ecofeminists have articulated some of the most promising avenues for cultivating a positive vision of social and socio-ecological change as a response to the systemic failures of what we might call industrial patriarchy. Rosemary Radford Ruether (1995, 204) argued back in 1975 that the oppression of women and the ecological crisis were both rooted in industrial society's "fundamental model of relationships," which "continues to be one of domination." Once this becomes recognized, she adds, the door is open to unite forces and "envision a radical reshaping of...basic socioeconomic relations" (Ibid). Consistent with this basic position, social and socio-ecological expressions of domination find common form in the way industrial society structures its basic relationship to the world. Other radical ecologists, including eco-Marxists and eco-phenomenologists, tend to concur with this general assessment each from the perspective of their own traditions. Indeed, despite important differences in focus and emphasis in the radical ecology movement, I would argue that their analyses of the systemic connections between social and socio-ecological relations mark their most originary insight.

If the overarching project of industrialization does express a domineering relation to the world, recognizing this total intention necessitates a contrasting model of relations that is equally comprehensive in scope and more compelling in vision. However, certain qualifications need to be made at the start so that we don't define 'contrasting' as

‘opposing.’ Now the direct (or monological) opposite of domineering relations are submissive ones. As mentioned in chapter three, this sensibility sometimes finds cultural expression in Western history against the background of organic philosophies of internal relations in direct opposition to mechanistic philosophies of external relations, along with meta-narratives of human decline that squarely contradict narratives of ascent. I have in mind in particular certain strains of the deep ecology movement, especially in the 1980s and ‘90s. With roots in the American preservationist movement traceable to Henry David Thoreau and John Muir (and reinforced by organic paradigms of scientific ecology ethicized by Aldo Leopold), romantic expressions of what might be called organic primitivism arguably came to a philosophical head in this movement. Articulating these alternative metaphors and narratives in this way is certainly the easiest (and seemingly strongest) way of bringing the total intention of domination into sharp relief. As always, however, totalizing reversals in lifeworld logic are problematic. In this case, for instance, the cultural problem of anthropocentrism is exchanged for the political problem of agency. While encouraging a humbler relation to the non-human world of wild/ecological nature in reaction to heedless anthropocentric aggression, ecocentric reversals focusing on the intrinsic virtues of open humility aren’t exactly conducive to *empowering* the kind of political action needed to confront the regimes of power most responsible for socio-ecological domination in the first place (Christion 2015). Furthermore, as social ecologists, ecofeminists, and environmental justice theorists have argued, the deep ecology focus on the problem of anthropocentrism risks over-generalizations of “human”

relations to “nature” at the expense of factoring unjust social relations into their analyses of the environmental crisis.<sup>161</sup>

On a charitable reading, perhaps cultivating humility before the natural world is meant to extend to other human beings as well—particularly those valorized by deep ecologists as ecocentric but long-derided as uncivilized and backward by the most ardent representatives of industrial civilization. Indigenous scholars, however, have argued that the neo-primitivist tendency to valorize the “noble savage” of Rousseau’s influence doesn’t challenge but reinforce the logic of Eurocentrism. Whether the “organic” or “original” relations to the land that indigenous people are said to have are deemed backwards or enlightened, uncivilized or uncorrupted, the basic logic of reducing indigenous agency to the ‘pre-human’ landscape of wild nature still holds. Regardless of which value pole is assigned priority, in other words, indigenous peoples are essentially reduced to wildlife (Bayet 1998). The depoliticizing side-effects risked by logical reversals of this kind, moreover, arguably apply to any ecofeminist predispositions to valorize the essence of, say, feminine nurturance and care implicit with being “closer to nature” as a cultural antidote to the patriarchal foundations of anthropocentric dominion (Merchant 2006). All things considered, then, metaphors and narratives are needed that speak to the existential *situation*, not to an essentialized worldview framework equally applicable to all situations. And in terms of content, they should comprehensively express

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<sup>161</sup> For instance, some cultural critics might treat industrial civilization as a universal force of history sweeping up virtually every citizen under its wake—without specific attention to the structural relations of power (i.e., *social* domination) that, on the one hand, is essential to “human” domination and, on the other, differentiates culpability for this.

social and socio-ecological relations in ways that trade humility for *respect* and domination for *empowerment*.

In this spirit, Merchant and Plumwood have labored to refigure domineering and submissive relations to the world alike with a *mutualistic* “model of relationships.” Critical of mechanistic and organic paradigms of relationality, along with the meta-narratives of ascent and decline that traditionally compliment them, Merchant (2003) proposes a “partnership” model of social and socio-ecological relations. For Plumwood (2002), this involves challenging “monological” relations to the human and nonhuman world (in either direction) by cultivating “dialogical” ways of being in the world. Plumwood’s model of dialogue stresses the situated dynamics of communication to express social and socio-ecological relations non-dualistically. Merchant’s metaphor of “partnership” is similarly conceived but accents an egalitarian sensibility. Taking these two metaphors of mutual relations together, we might envision a world of social and socio-ecological *partnerships* as an alternative vision to that of industrial modernity, and understand *dialogue* as a means for achieving this ideal in practice (Christion 2015).

A total intention for *dialogical partnership* holds philosophical and political promise for a number of reasons that I will only touch on here. Philosophically speaking, dialogue and partnership are powerful metaphors to describe mutual relations to the world ontologically.<sup>162</sup> At the same time, they could also serve as powerful narratives to articulate the normative (ethico-political) dimensions structuring these relations. As

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<sup>162</sup> Indeed, an argument could be made that Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical ontology is essentially *dialogical* in ways that traverse social and socio-ecological relations (i.e., in ways that obviate subject/object, self/other, and human/nature dualisms). In a chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* entitled “The Thing and the Natural World,” for instance, Merleau-Ponty (2012, 334) says “nature must be our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue,” and he appears to mean this literally (Christion 2015).

descriptors, dialogue and partnership are existential phenomena: they are inherently situated-situating processes that occur in time and space, and find motivational expression accordingly between the foreground and background levels of lifeworld experience. Hence, understood fluidly in terms of existential phenomenology, a dialogical partnership paradigm of social and socio-ecological mutualism intertwines the basic categories of western thought polarized by the metaphysical tradition. As a matter of praxis, moreover, a critical phenomenology of dialogical partnership can help bring the ethical logistics of problem-driven responsibility and the political logistics of solution-driven empowerment into fluid relation.

Perhaps a good example of dialogical partnership in action can be glimpsed from indigenous relations to the world as described by Native American scholars. Consider, for instance, Vine Deloria Jr.'s (2001) attempt to capture the "broader Indian idea of relationship" with a simple formula:  $\text{Power} + \text{Place} = \text{Personality}$ . As he describes it, relations to the world are *personal* to the extent that communal existence is attuned to the particular relations between things defining *place* as an expression of the "living energy" or *power* of the universe more broadly. This relation to the world, however, isn't simply premised on cosmological faith, belief, and ritual alone, but is participatory in experience because it entails the "completion of relationships and the determination of how this world should function" (Ibid, 23). "This equation simply means that the universe is alive, but it also contains within it the very important suggestion that the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner" (Ibid).

It is clear from Deloria Jr.'s writings that indigenous relations to the world are premised on a kind of lifeworld care that intertwines the ethical and the ontological.

Chief Luther Standing Bear, a fellow Lakota of a previous generation in the early-twentieth century, relates each element—power, place, personality—in Deloria Jr.’s equation in prose that capture the aesthetic and perhaps spiritual depths of this care (and, we could add, the ontological security that accompanies this).

The Lakota...loved the earth and all things of the earth, the attachment growing with age. The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power. It was good for the skin to touch the earth and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bear feet on the sacred earth...Wherever the Lakota went, he was safe with Mother Earth...This thought comforted and sustained the Lakota and he was eternally filled with gratitude. From Wakan Tanka [Great Mystery] there came a great unifying life force that flowed in and through all living things—the flowers of the plains, blowing winds, rocks, trees, birds, animals—and was the same force that had been breathed into the first man. Thus all things were kindred and brought together by the same Great Mystery...In talking to children, the old Lakota would place a hand on the ground and explain: ‘We sit in the lap of our Mother. From her we, and all other living things, come. We shall soon pass, but the place where we now rest will last forever.’ So we, too, learned to sit or lie on the ground and become conscious of life about us in its multitude of forms...Everything was possessed of personality, only differing from us in form. Knowledge was inherent in all things. The world was a library and its books were the stones, leaves, grass, brooks, and the birds and animals that shared, alike with us, the storms and blessings of the earth. We learned to do what only the student of nature ever learns, and that was to feel beauty. (Standing Bear 1998, 202-204)

From Deloria Jr.’s and Standing Bear’s descriptions, it would seem that, generally speaking, Native Americans traditionally relate to a world of human and nonhuman “personalities” unique in their familiarity and unfamiliarity, but only to the extent that communities fulfill and maintain (normative) place-based relations in accordance with the “power” generally situating the world of common experience.<sup>163</sup> But if, as I am suggesting, this “broader Indian idea of relationship” captures something like a dialogical partnership with the world of everyday experience, how might this find *political*

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<sup>163</sup> Danial Wildcat (2009), a disciple of Deloria Jr., has written a book entitled *Red Alert: Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge* that applies such a Native American perspective specifically to the climate issue.

expression. Cultivating a total intention for climate response cannot rest with ontological, ethical, and aesthetic considerations of place-based relations alone. When practical decisions have to be made—when the material situation is marked by adversity and the lifeworld situation is marked by uncertainty—people must find collective footing on the temporal landscape of history.

Kyle P. Whyte (2018, 224) touches on this element of Native American experience as it relates to indigenous responses to climate change, which he describes as a kind of intergenerational decision-making practice “motivated through dialogic narratives with descendants and ancestors.” Specifically, this intergenerational dialogue takes place through “spiraling time.”

Spiraling time is a dialogical unfolding that also has, in a sense, forward motion that can be both predictable and irregular. I interpret the dialogical unfolding of spiraling time as sometimes involving a certain form of philosophizing about what actions we or our communities ought to take to respond to the issues and problems that characterize our current situations. The form of philosophizing starts with questions about how ancestral and future generations would interpret the situations that we find ourselves in today. For example, just in everyday conversations that Indigenous persons have with one another or in Indigenous studies literatures, we sometimes hear people ask the following questions: “How do we return the gifts from our ancestors?” (Kimmerer, 2013) “How do we become good ancestors ourselves?” The first question opens dialogue with our ancestors. The question asks for critical reflection on what our ancestors would believe their gifts or insights to us would be if they would be able to have a chance to analyze our current situations. The second question opens dialogue with the coming generations. The question asks us to reflect critically on those actions we can do, that may not be immediately apparent to us, that coming generations would appreciate in the future. (Ibid, 229)

Here, it seems, we see a kind of critical phenomenology of response striving to traverse the existential landscape of lifeworld ambiguity somewhere between historical sense and contingency—or, as Merleau-Ponty says *en route* to a thinkable politics, somewhere between what “our actions mean to us” and their “external consequences.” Not unlike the deeply uncertain situations faced by indigenous peoples with the arrival of European

colonization, many indigenous communities today are on the forefront of climate adaptation as they face another onslaught of uncertainties beyond their initial grasp and influence. In this context, intergenerational dialogue affords a temporal space for communal reflection and dialogue in the process of making ethico-political sense of the present situation moving forward.

The form of philosophizing that is promoted by these [intergenerational] questions, I claim, is counterfactual dialogue. It is a dialogue in which—without full information—we speculate on how our ancestors and our future generations would interpret today’s situations and what recommendations they would make for us as guidance for our individual and collective actions. What we determine to be right or wrong actions in our lives stems importantly from the results of these dialogues that involve currently living persons, memories and stories of past persons and the anticipated interpretations of future persons. (Ibid, 229-230)

From this description, one might interpret the motivational grounds of “counterfactual dialogue” stemming from a collective recognition that the situation they face is indeed profoundly ambiguous. There is enough sense held in common to realize that a deeply contingent problem is afoot (thanks in part to the traditions of indigenous knowledge and practice situating them in the world gifted by their ancestral past), but not *enough* sense to take up the novel situation this puts them in and thus respond with confidence. It might be said that the ancestral past afforded succeeding generations with a “total intention” to fulfill place-based and intergenerational relations of mutual reciprocity and well-being—and make sense of problems against this background as symptomatic of damaged or unfulfilled relationships. As always, however, the unfamiliar elements of what I earlier termed “external history” always promise problems that were, at least in their specificity, unencountered by the past. As I interpret indigenous ways of responding to deeply ambiguous problems like climate adaptation, then, the socio-cultural background of lifeworld experience is what enables communities to dialogically

reach into their ancestral past and future for guidance, but they must also improvise by engaging the future experimentally and creatively. Eventually, perhaps, with humble respect and affirmative wisdom, with grounding anxieties and transcendental hopes, and with actions invalidated and confirmed over time, the essential relation of motivation that fluidly translates problem and solution will take hold.

Today, Whyte suggests, many indigenous people working on conservation and environmental justice perform “counterfactual dialogue” in practice “as a type of science (fiction) that seeks to ‘waken’ protagonists and particular qualities of relationships” (Ibid, 232). Ultimately, he introduces “living Indigenous science (fiction) just to highlight the connection between Indigenous knowledge (the science) and the counterfactual philosophizing (the fiction)” (Ibid). As he explains in his analysis of indigenous science fiction, for instance, many films bring to expression the “motivational value for imagining better futures” by relating traditions of indigenous ways of being with “sound scientific knowledge” (Ibid).

Indigenous persons everywhere often describe our current situation in science fiction narratives...Like in dystopian science fiction, our ancestors would have seen us living in a situation in which the conditions of our individual and collective agency are almost entirely curtailed. But our ancestors and future generations are rooting for us to find those secret sources of agency that will allow us to empower protagonists that can help us survive the dystopia or post-apocalypse. And there is quite a bit of creativity involved in figuring out who the protagonists will be. The literature on Indigenous science fiction discusses the range of protagonists that Indigenous authors introduce in their narratives, from nonhumans to spirits to women to youth (Dillon, 2012; Lempert, 2014; Monani, 2016). (Ibid, 230-231)

From this perspective, it seems like the monological conflict between hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism experienced in the industrialized world does indeed suffer from a lack of meaningful sources of mediation—sources that would enable collectives to skillfully and imaginatively cope with (and transcend) the

ambiguities of co-existence to make sense of non-sense. Whyte quotes Danika Medak-Saltzman to reinforce this point: “Indigenous futurist work can and does also explore a variety of dystopian possibilities, which allows for critical contemplation about the dangerous ‘what ifs’ we might face and, more pragmatically, can aid us in our efforts to imagine our way out of our present dystopic moment to call forth better futures” (Ibid, 232). In the lifeworld context of industrial modernity, the abyss between hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism is certainly real. But if the moniker of dialogical partnership can capture in outline something like “the broader Indian idea of relationship” as a total intention deep in the traditional background of indigenous experience, it would seem that the climate situation isn’t necessarily impervious to lifeworld transition. Of course, while non-indigenous peoples can learn from indigenous sources of wisdom in good faith and without appropriation,<sup>164</sup> cultivating new ways of being in the world requires finding durable socio-cultural roots in their own wisdom traditions where motivating sources of meaning can be taken up and refigured.

Perhaps there are ways of dialogically traversing the climate abyss—of working through the monological impasse between problem-driven ethical responsibility and solution-driven political intentionality by scientifically and imaginatively engaging the climate situation. Were a critical shift to take hold at the lifeworld level from largely unconscious projects of domination to visionary projects of dialogical partnership, we can assume that the historical and material figures of climate change would appear quite differently. Against such a normative background, the material realities of climate

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<sup>164</sup> See Whyte’s (2018) essay as well for a discussion of problematic (self-privileging) tendencies by white allies in the climate movement to build solidarity with Native Americans.

instability would be perceived as a fundamental transgression of socio-ecological dialogical and partnership in need of redress, while the historical figure of climate injustice would similarly appear as a breach of dialogical partnership across socio-cultural differences. In shifting the lifeworld logic of perception in this way, the technocratic, pragmatic, and other top-down and reductionist approaches to climate change would be more likely to come under critical scrutiny. If the total project of old intends to advance climate solutions that ultimately work *for* the anthropocentric, patriarchal, and colonial system of industrial capitalism, framing the climate problem as a violation of dialogical partnership might disclose these solutions as in fact symptomatic of the essential problem to begin with.<sup>165</sup> With respect to relations of motivation, what was once a motivating solution becomes a problem that one is now consciously motivated to address in common with others. At this point, climate change will have finally “taken place” in the form of lifeworld transition so that discrete “problems” and “solutions” take new form—not simply in reaction to the ethical situation or the political situation but more broadly in response to the “climate situation.”

To accomplish this, however, such a socio-cultural paradigm shift would have to be general enough to mean a number of different things to different people within the parameters set by the “material figure” of climate change and the “problem-driven”

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<sup>165</sup> To be clear, the implications of this point don’t necessarily suggest that *every* pragmatic political strategy, or every technofix or market-based response, ultimately does more harm than good (whether in principle or in a material sense). Again, we want to avoid sweeping monological reversals simply for the sake of maintaining *a priori* cognitive consistency. What counts first, rather, is the total intention operative in the background that broadly orients political, technological, and economic measures. The hope is that, once the existential abyss between external and internal history, problem and solution, responsibility and intentionality, and respect and empowerment is meaningfully bridged (cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally), *then* we will be better positioned collectively to perceive the significance and role of these measures in action. With our eyes on the prize of social and socio-ecological partnership, in other words, hopefully pragmatic or high-tech market solutions can be dialogically processed and assessed *case by case* in the contingent thickness of political involvement before being elected or rejected.

demands for systemic transition. This might include saving the planet for future generations, affording wild nature the autonomy needed for biological evolution to recuperate, stabilizing carbon and nitrogen cycles, decolonizing agriculture and local economies more generally, healing the wounds of social and socio-ecological alienation, fulfilling indigenous place-based and ancestral relationships, following through on what Klein (2014, 458) calls “the unfinished business of liberation,” and so on. To the extent that the climate “problem” and its “solution” don’t simply concern ongoing carbon emissions and various cases of exploitation but the socio-cultural project of industrial modernity more generally, there is ample room for all such visions to the extent that the bottom line for each trades domineering relations to the world for just and sustainable partnerships with it premised on mutual flourishing—and, critically, are conducive to political strategies for getting there.<sup>166</sup>

Of course, root metaphors, meta-narratives, and ethical ontologies “on paper” are too abstract to become normative. Powerful visions aren’t just grand articulations of a comprehensive worldview to be educated or inspired into. They are *existential expressions* of a total intention in the making that must have tangible footing in the concrete world of everyday experience. Dialogical partnerships must be conceived and worked out, certainly, but they also need to be felt and enacted—or in a word, *lived*—as

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<sup>166</sup> Keep in mind that such a lifeworld transition to climate consciousness and agency would *inaugurate*, not dispel, climate ambiguity. It’s one thing to become collectively responsive to systemic problems in light of systemic solutions, and vice-versa. But it’s quite another to collectively *realize* systemic transition in practice given the inherent contingencies of political action that make progress and ultimately success inherently unpredictable. Political perceptions appropriate to the climate situation might afford a thinkable politics of climate action, but this has to be confirmed in practice. Hence, coming to identify with visionary futures of climate justice in the form of dialogical partnership would merely be the last step to becoming actively situated by the historical and material figure of the climate situation. But it isn’t until a systemic transition materializes (as with the matrix event accomplished by the Industrial Revolution) that total intentions for dialogical partnership—previously fought over with competing visions in the ideological arena—would become *passively situating* as a socio-cultural project destined in its self-evidence for fulfillment.

an expression of collective identity at a “human” level (newly redefined). Visionary academics, activists, artists, and others can help cultivate a new sense of the world and our lives in it against the backdrop of dialogical partnership. Compelling fictional narratives, rituals, music, and other forms of poetic expression across various media can help us imaginatively and viscerally channel our anxieties and sense of wonder productively as we search for mythic forms of hope, inspiration, and some appropriate measure of ontological security in the process of cultivating this existential project. And finally, such wide-ranging cultural expressions of dialogical partnership would have to find social expression—governmental, juridical, technological, economic—in order to concretize and confirm this lifeworld transition with growing confidence. And overcoming total intentions for dominion for the sake of realizing future horizons of dialogical partnership certainly calls for grassroots activists innovative enough to create the ideological contexts and practical spaces required for this ultimate exercise in praxis.

Perhaps, then, a total intention for dialogical partnership could help people situated by the socio-cultural world of industrial capitalism to critically confront and meaningfully digest the comprehensive realities of systemic climate change by bringing problem-driven and solution-driven motivations into existential relation. Should such a positive vision emerge on the socio-cultural stage of history power enough to inspire hope and confidence in the socio-cultural future, we may not have to simply wait for people to become passively situated by systemic problems like climate change or rely too strongly on their becoming motivated by the hard shove of external nature and history. Again, and in recognition of the serious risks of overemphasizing urgency, if we wait until climate change “takes place” as if from occupation by this most foreign of powers,

opportunities for free response will have to give way to the necessities of reaction in self-defense—where power politics assumes its rawest form.

In the final analysis, therefore, the hard socio-cultural and geophysical realities of climate change don't simply require us to become actively situated by the historical and material figure of this problem, although this is our most immediate task. Considering the time-lag between cause and effect, action and response, and so on, these realities ultimately require intentionally situating ourselves toward a visionary future well ahead of time. Should they come to inform the variegated landscape of collective identity and its points of equilibrium, positive visions will *pull* socio-cultural existence forward as the expression of a total intention bent on realizing a world starting to appear on the horizon—albeit with no guarantees.

### ***Conclusion***

Having argued in previous chapters that the challenges of motivating collective action on systemic climate change are predominantly existential in nature, this chapter argues that Merleau-Ponty's critical phenomenology is uniquely suited to making comprehensive sense of this complex and multidimensional problem. My reading of his synthesis of phenomenology, existentialism, and historical materialism centers on what he has called the relation of motivation. In the larger context of the ethical quandary of denial focusing chapters two and three and the political quandary of transition treated in chapter four, this chapter introduces his dialectical philosophy to outline the critical challenges of bringing problem-driven and solution-driven motivations into productive relation across multiple domains of lifeworld experience.

Just as empiricism and intellectualism, and Orthodox and Western Marxism, are philosophically predisposed to miss essential relations of motivation, the same can be said of hard medicine realism and positive vision culturalism. From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, there is an extent to which the objectivist logic of empiricism, Orthodox Marxism, and hard medicine realism all pivot on the motivated situation as fact. By contrast, the relatively subjectivist logic of intellectualism, Western Marxism, and positive vision culturalism predominantly centers on the motivating situation as undertaken. Maybe, as I've suggested at times, this motivational tendency to bifurcate is rooted in cognitive needs for conceptual (theoretical) consistency. Perhaps, with Dewey in mind, it's subtended by a more basic historical or existential condition by which we generally find ourselves at "an impasse in life" marked by "an impotence in interaction [and an] inability to make effective transition." In any case, the systemic challenges of collective response at the heart of the climate situation today seem to bring out the paradoxical logic of existence in some of the most dramatic ways imaginable (or unimaginable). Like few other issues in historical memory, the climate situation calls on us to cultivate socio-cultural pathways that can productively handle the ambiguities intertwining history and nature, self and other, meaning and contingency, activity and passivity. Whether we consider perception or class consciousness, the essential gestalt shift expressing the most ordinary responses to existence begins with an embodied dialectical grasp of the lived ambiguities of the motivated-motivating situation. The

paradoxical logic of the climate situation, in other words, calls for something like an “ethico-politics of ambiguity” on a grand scale.<sup>167</sup>

Considering the challenges of collective action, I begin with Merleau-Ponty’s proposition that a “thinkable” politics requires “learning history.” Effective political action demands a skillful perception of history, which involves being conscious of the tensions between “our intentions—what our actions mean for us” and “the external consequences of our actions, what they mean in an historical context.” Bringing solution-driven and problem-driven motivations into relation requires a collective ability to bring the background assumptions of “internal history” to consciousness in response to the contingent figure of “external history.” Put otherwise, political movements must intend meaningful change by actively situating history towards new horizons of possibility (“solutions”), but do so reflexively in response to being passively situated by the historic problem in question beyond one’s immediate grasp and influence.

In the deeply ambiguous context of systemic transition, however, success first requires a gestalt shift in lifeworld sensibilities such that, phenomenologically speaking, the problem becomes meaningful enough to afford a collective platform to discuss and enact possible solutions. In the case of perception, this shift was illustrated when the shipwreck interrogated by the perceiver suddenly appeared. In a sense, the beach stroller was passively situated or captivated by this strange figure in the distance and drawn in accordingly as a silent call to make sense of it. Once opened up and moved by this

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<sup>167</sup> This twist refers to Beauvoir’s essay “The Ethics of Ambiguity.” Considerable scholarship on Beauvoir now exists exploring the mutual influences between her and Merleau-Ponty, and the significance of ‘ambiguity’ may have been one of the most important motifs inspiring this philosophical exchange. See in particular Sonia Kruks (2012), *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity*.

strange spectacle, the perceiver actively situated himself to the perceived object until the figure finally achieved *sens* against the lifeworld background of sensible forms. To the extent that the figure in this case informed the background, we might suppose that the next time the perceiver encounters a similar object in this situation (now more familiar/motivating), it will become apparent more quickly as a result. This phenomenological shift also occurred in “the passage to class consciousness” experienced by the factory worker. Compared to sensory perception, however, the more abstract figure of class exploitation affects background structures of *sens* at a more general level of lifeworld existence. The factory worker was objectively situated by powerful forces of exploitation, and these oppressive conditions opened him up to actively connect the dots of various experiences to make sense of his situation anew. The gestalt shift to class consciousness that emerged from this “molecular process”—in ways predictable and unpredictable, logical and contingent—effected a rather comprehensive lifeworld reversal signaled by a new logic of perception. What was once a life largely directed from without via structures of class exploitation beyond his immediate grasp and influence transitioned to an existence empowered to make sense of these conditions for what they are and take conscious responsibility for his—and perhaps his class’s—future looking ahead.

Now with respect to motivating collective action on climate change, my argument is that an even more comprehensive lifeworld transition is called for. Not unlike the matrix event that shifted socio-cultural existence in the European world from medieval theocentrism to the modern order of industrial capitalism, an historic gestalt shift is ultimately needed to make existential sense of the climate issue for what it is. But matrix events like this only occur under the right historical conditions. It took centuries for

European generations to palpably feel the historic tensions between the hard realities of medieval existence and cultivate a positive vision alternative to help overcome them in practice. However, before these critical generations could open themselves to (or find motivating) this vague new world of human freedom, rationality, and prosperity, they first had to be sufficiently *situated* by socio-cultural existence as a problem and motivated to respond accordingly. Increasingly, despite the inevitable fluctuations promised by the contingencies of history, the inertia of the institutionalized past wasn't just motivating everyday life passively and unreflectively. Overall, historic existence was shifting to become increasingly *motivated* to actively and consciously reach back into this lifeworld background—not to completely abandon it, but as a means for innovating new spaces for creative freedom, and ultimately redefine the socio-cultural matrix of European identity and the “total intention” of industrial existence that expresses this.

In the macro-level context of systemic transition as a matrix event, I argue that the critical task at hand at this point in history is to learn to become situated/motivated by the figure of climate change as a deeply systemic problem that is initially (but not entirely) beyond our collective grasp and influence. Generally speaking, the hard realities of the climate issue must be encountered as an “external absurdity” that roundly challenges traditional sensibilities hegemonic in the background of intersubjective existence. Critically, however, the existential passivity experienced in the face of climate absurdity must nevertheless find enough meaningful traction in this very background to suggest possible avenues of response. Presumably, the beach stroller was captivated by the strange object just off the coast precisely because of the “vague expectation” that it already suggested, or the “presentiment of an imminent order...[that] will, suddenly,

respond to questions that are merely latent in the landscape.” The worker, furthermore, might never have become conscious of his exploitation were it not for a preexisting sense of the injustices suffered or the rights to human dignity violated under existing conditions. Hence, motivated negativity and motivating positivity must intertwine in dialectical tension on the lifeworld stage of historical existence. In the climate context, the existential role of positive visions for a better future is precisely to open up meaningful possibilities for an authentic response to questions that might otherwise be impossible to ask in good faith.

Unfortunately, it seems evident that historic relations between hard medicine and positive vision motivations have not yet achieved the productive tension prerequisite to the lifeworld gestalt shift essential to organizing grassroots climate action. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s political reflections on the war, I suggest that one reason for this disconnect between problem-driven and solution-driven motives is that many in the industrialized world do not feel historically situated or decentered by climate change, and thus appropriately motivated to respond. If prewar French confidence left decision-makers feeling *underwhelmed* in the face of Nazi transgression, the German Parisians appeared *overwhelmed* by this phenomenon. In my view, the existential problem of climate response (and specifically the political quandary of transition) implicates the relatively passive forms of denial expressed by the French and the more active forms exemplified by the German Parisians. In some ways, many of us get by naively and optimistically in blissful ignorance of the systemic implications of climate change. In other respects, ignorance and apathy have to be willfully mastered. Either way, whether

passively or actively so, many in the industrial world do not feel situated by the figure of climate change enough to take ethical and political responsibility.

Knowing which motivations are in play is essential to addressing this problem. But a dialectical approach is needed. In addition to distinguishing the problem-driven motives basic to the hard medicine stance from solution-driven motives expressing positive visions of the future, climate movements must ultimately bring these collectively-embodied motivations into productive tension with one another in recognition of their essential ambiguity on the socio-cultural stage of history. How might this occur? After all, unlike the beach stroller who immediately recognizes the absurdity of the strange object and experiences the “vague expectation” that *sens* is on the verge of being made, the ambiguity of systemic climate change doesn’t appear widely felt much less consciously acknowledged. And in contrast to the worker who—in feeling the injustices of his oppressive station in life—was already open to becoming class conscious under the right “molecular” circumstances, I worry that the lived weight of climate change isn’t experienced to this degree. Considering the time-lag between the causes and effects of climate change, moreover, we cannot simply wait to become passively situated by this phenomenon. By then it will be too late, the world will be locked in (as it already is today to a certain extent<sup>168</sup>).

All things considered, therefore, we must become *actively situated* by the figure of climate change. Where ‘activity’ implies purposeful intention and being ‘situated’ implies a relatively passive receptivity of material givens, it could be said that we must

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<sup>168</sup> A recent UN report warns that we have 12 years to make dramatic reductions to avoid exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius (Watts 2018).

actively work to openly feel the pressing weight of systemic climate change as a problem with no immediate solutions. Conversely, one could say that we must *affectively situate ourselves* to the figure of climate change, where ‘affect’ implies an open respect for the problem at hand while ‘situating ourselves’ implies finding ways of grappling with it. Absent a dialectical perspective, this task is irrevocably paradoxical in the same sense that, for Socrates, ignorance is the crowning achievement of wisdom.<sup>169</sup>

At this point, I have come to define the task of climate response under the rubric of becoming actively situated by climate change such that problem-driven and solution-driven motives come into productive relation. But I have yet to adequately reconcile the generalizing logic of the former with the polycentric logic of the latter in this broader context. The question here largely concerns how socio-cultural differences factor into the existential problem. To what extent, in other words, is the existential task of becoming actively situated by climate change specific to socio-cultural differences, and to what extent is this imperative common across these differences? Determining the relevance of socio-cultural difference to the existential problem requires further nuancing what is meant by the climate “situation.” Specifically, I argue that a careful distinction has to be made between climate change as an *historical* phenomenon, on the one hand, and as a *material* phenomenon, on the other. In the language of gestalt theory, the figure of climate change standing out against the background structures of lifeworld existence is both historic and material in significance. This is precisely the distinction avoided by the

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<sup>169</sup> As I mention below, ambiguity has to be *achieved*, not just experienced as an unfortunate condition that one happens to fall into (and is thus eager to resolve). Given the abyss intrinsic to the climate situation compelling people to take monological sides to keep themselves from being stranded in the unsettling void of meaninglessness, the challenges of climate response turn ambiguity into a virtue—where, for instance, learning to accept and skillfully handle contingency, indeterminacy, paradox, irony, adversity, etc. deserves the same kind of respect that courage does.

hard medicine and positive vision camps.<sup>170</sup> In particular, I contend that socio-cultural differences (particularly along lines of institutionalized power) are more significant with respect to the historical figure of climate change, and less so vis-a-vis the material figure of climate change.

One of the principle tasks of becoming actively situated by climate change involves “learning history” as socio-cultural beings where power relations matter, and “learning nature” as human beings where life itself matters. At some point, communities and the individuals within them must figure out how to reconcile these two aspects of their being in relation to the climate problem. In the process of honestly reflecting on the material implications of climate change at this level of generality, it’s hard to imagine that equally general questions about the systemic (and ultimately historical) causes and effects of this problem wouldn’t come up. Conversely, it seems likely that questions concerning the historical implications of the climate situation might eventually lead one to reflect on the material conditions of life on Earth. The sociological imagination essential to learning history and the materialist imagination basic to learning nature must therefore find enough comprehension to think, feel, and comport oneself with some measure of consistency across these domains. Put otherwise, the problems of unjust social relations and unsustainable socio-ecological relations must be understood coherently as symptomatic of a larger problem ultimately demanding systemic transition. A thinkable politics of climate response requires this level of comprehension if it is to cultivate the lifeworld traction essential to grappling with the systemic implications of the

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<sup>170</sup> Again, without a third term of dialectical mediation and an embrace of ontological ambiguity, logical consistency demands choosing between scientific objectivity and cultural subjectivity—or between the motivated and the motivating aspects of the climate situation.

situation we find ourselves in for the sake of opening up political possibilities for systemic transition.

To the extent that the climate problem is symptomatic of industrialization as a socio-cultural project to dominate, recognizing this total intention will require a contrasting model of social and socio-ecological relations that is equally comprehensive in scope and more compelling in vision. Drawing on Merchant and Plumwood, then, I conclude this chapter with a positive vision of mutualistic relations on the model of “dialogical partnership” with the objective of putting the industrial project into sharp relief *without* reverting to monological reversals that trade the hubris of domineering relations for the passive humility of submissive ways of being. As a total intention under cultivation, its existential purpose would be to achieve, not resolve, climate ambiguity—that productive tension between the motivated and the motivating that make critical shifts in perception, consciousness, political agency, and indeed history possible.

We know from Merleau-Ponty’s critical phenomenology of motivation that being passively situated/motivated by the world entails actively situating/motivating oneself to it, and vice-versa, in a dialectic of immanence and transcendence, negativity and positivity. Perhaps encouraging a total intention to realize social and socio-ecological partnerships in dialogue when possible and in agonistic political conflict when not<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> In the practical contexts of political action especially, it would be problematic to uniformly (dualistically) prioritize the ‘dialogical response’ over the ‘monological reaction’ as a matter of principle. Although I discuss this distinction at some length in a separate essay (Christion, 2015), I do not explicitly thematize this in the dissertation. I’ll note here, however, that whether one mode of action is more appropriate than another depends on the situation at hand. I do indeed prioritize the dialogical response as an historical ideal or positive vision of mutualistic social and socio-ecological relations. But “reaching out” to others in the spirit of dialogue and partnership to find common political ground may be naïve and counter-productive. Particularly when institutionalized power differences are pronounced and the other in question is oriented to oppose common ground let alone progress, political consequentialism might certainly demand a full-throated reaction in the form of, say, direct-action resistance. Unless dramatic historical contingencies changed the political landscape, striving for a “dialogical partnership” with Exxon Mobile or the Trump Administration,

holds promise as current and succeeding generations struggle to overcome the existential barriers to motivating collective action on climate change.

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would be absurd. As discussed in chapter two, pragmatic intentions to find room for dialogue and foster partnerships with corporate and state agents that are institutionally positioned to oppose meaningful progress on the climate problem cannot be understood as virtuous. Particularly given the past two to three decades of political experience on the climate issue, doing so would accomplish little more than opening the door for them to covertly co-opt, water down, and ultimately thwart the movement's larger aims to protect business-as-usual. Likewise, grassroots climate justice groups have to figure out how to grasp the political landscape of motivations before making reliable judgements about which people hold promise as potential activists or allies and which are more likely to oppose or subvert it (or else waste scarce resources on people that are indifferent) Yet, if "monological reactions" are sometimes needed politically to realize a total intention of dialogical partnership historically, we have to ask if "the means justify the ends." Although I certainly can't do justice to this perennial problem in political philosophy here (see Meleau-Ponty 1969), I will suggest that even in political contexts some kind of priority ought to be given to dialogical partnerships with this long-view in mind. When in doubt, for instance, one might admonish climate activists—hoping, for example, to grow the movement by attracting support from other movements, certain politicians, experts, public citizens, etc.—to first take a dialogical approach in good faith to see if enough potential exists to further their ends (if not in the short-run with respect to making concrete political gains, perhaps in the long-run with an eye to making ideological progress). If this is deemed unfeasible or too risky, resources should be committed elsewhere. All of this requires "practical wisdom" in Aristotle's sense, and it's my hope that an ethico-political ontology of dialogical partnership might somehow prove useful in this regard.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation opens up with a seemingly straightforward and focused question: How should we respond to climate change? Although this question was intended to both anchor the dissertation project and keep it afloat, the seas to be navigated after penning these words turned out to be an even greater maelstrom of challenges than I anticipated. Certainly, more than once I felt like the dots that needed to be carefully connected were swirling around up and under like plankton in stormy waters as I tried to steady myself. Indeed, even still at the conclusion of this undertaking, I can't help but reinvoke the Merleau-Ponty quote also offered in the introductory chapter warning that "an enormous labor is required to put things into perspective."

My decision to set sail, in partial view of the stormy horizon "immanent in the clouds," was simultaneously heartfelt in meaning and academically stimulated. Were it possible to transcend the limitations of our personal and collective perspectives with care to come up with one issue that, in all its implications, truly *matters* in some universal if not homogenous way, it wouldn't be easy to dismiss the climate problem as a candidate. In one way or another, whether one's focus of concern centers on material or spiritual conditions, the local or the global, urban or rural, present or the future, or on nature or people, the climate situation speaks. I've personally heard from friends and acquaintances predominantly drawn to the social justice and peace traditions tell me (the environmentalist in the room) that it was the climate issue that first woke them up to the gravity of the environmental crisis. With the emergence of the climate justice movement, moreover, a powerful space is being created for cross-fertilization across many traditional

lines. As Jenifer Kent discovered in her ethnographic research on climate action groups (CAGs) in Australia, the unusually comprehensive scope of this problem makes it something of a keystone issue or a general heuristic for activists bewildered by the surfeit of problems overwhelming the world today.

Several CAG participants commented on how climate change brings together a range of long-term issues and concerns for them. Climate change then becomes a problem set, a way to synthesize and filter concerns that might extend beyond the environment to capture more broadly their concerns about the economic system, politics, social justice, food and water security...In this way, climate change works to ‘connect the dots’ on other issues...Climate change came to represent, as stated by Michele, *‘everything that’s wrong with society coming to a head’* or otherwise by Randall: *‘It’s quite extraordinary really that all of the things that have interested and concerned me for the last 20 years have come together and relate in some way to climate change’*. (Kent 2016, 111-112)

To the extent that activists were beginning to broadly implicate climate change in the economic, political, juridical, and ideological structures of production, consumption, and power, they were arguably positioning themselves to confront the holistic nature of systemic transition demanding collective action. Perhaps, at a certain point, it was as if the voice of politics calling for a response had become the voice of history.

Yet, in addition to being heartfelt in meaning, the challenging subject of climate response is an academically fascinating one because it opens up so many horizons to explore. Referring once again to the introductory chapter, the subject matter here is interdisciplinary in general and philosophical in particular in a most profound sense. Within the confines of my background, interests, and capacities, I’ve been called either directly or indirectly to relate findings in the natural and social sciences with perspectives in the humanities, with little regard for the “two cultures” that have long divided academia (Snow 2013). Questions of climate response, however, require weaving through and between what is essential to geology, ecology, biology, chemistry, sociology,

psychology, economics, political science, geography, history, and other disciplines. One must carefully consider how nature works; how society, culture, power, and history work; what guides and moves different people to perceive, think, feel, talk, negotiate, commit, and behave in ways both individual and collective; and so on. Any viable structural diagnosis and meaningful response to the climate situation presupposes a comprehensive grasp of social and socio-ecological relations. Indeed, particularly when considering the call made in chapter five for an historical-materialist imagination, it is almost as if nothing is ultimately irrelevant to this historic task in one way or another.

I'm aware that these lofty pronouncements might seem too hyperbolic to take seriously. But the point to be made here is that questions of climate response *lend themselves* to this kind of hyperbole: the stakes couldn't be much higher, the scope couldn't be more sweeping, and the call to action couldn't be more soaring. Once people, academics or otherwise, discover where their unique talents and ambitions lie, there is almost certainly a place for them to connect with others and make that most secret of decisions: to either help cultivate something like a total intention for dialogical partnership with each authentic response, or else release themselves to the socio-cultural currents of history perpetuating the problem itself.

As the totalizing implications of the climate situation begin appearing on the horizon, I wouldn't be surprised if academic opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration start announcing themselves. But there is a reason why I single out the relevance of philosophy in particular. Considering the interdisciplinary dimensions of the subject matter, I would suggest that they ultimately speak to cognitive demands for a broader understanding of the world (whether, say, towards a comprehensive diagnosis of

the climate situation or towards an equally comprehensive response to it). The need for this kind of cognitive comprehension is, in my view, indispensable. Fostering new *relationships* to the world, however, requires something more as well. In addition to articulating new ways of conceiving the world, new ways of affectively processing the world and new ways of living in the world all have to find some larger coherence in the background of lifeworld experience. Following Heidegger, I have occasionally suggested finding new ways of “being in the world” as a succinct expression of this comprehensive task. But here I prefer to recall Merleau-Ponty’s term *sens*—which denotes something like meaning-as-orientation in the French, but for him largely speaks to the intersubjectively embodied relation of motivation that is considerably unique to his philosophy. This term seems particularly germane to the point I want to make insofar as the Greek *philosophia* directly translates to ‘love of wisdom,’ and *sense* is a synonym of wisdom. Now if we take ‘sense’ as *sens* and expand this to mean ‘good sense’ and ‘common sense’ and perhaps ultimately ‘perception,’ I would suggest beyond simple wordplay that wisdom—and thus philosophy—promise something much more than, say, good judgement. So if, as I claim, the subject matter of this dissertation project is philosophical in particular, this is because responding to the totalizing implications of the climate situation in common ultimately calls on us in various ways to *make sense* of the world and our relation to it with this kind of depth and breadth. Perhaps T.S. Eliot’s (1963, 147) lament, in his own poetic voice and time, captures something like this need for renewed wisdom in his opening stanza of *Choruses from the Rock*.

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,  
The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.  
O perpetual revolution of configured stars,  
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,

O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying  
The endless cycle of idea and action,  
Endless invention, endless experiment,  
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;  
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;  
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.  
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,  
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,  
But nearness to death no nearer to GOD.  
Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?  
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries  
Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust.

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