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The Role of Philosophers in Climate Change

ABSTRACT: *Some conceptions of the role of philosophers in climate change focus mainly on theoretical progress in philosophy, or on philosophers as individual citizens. Against these views, I defend a* skill view*: philosophers should use our characteristic skills as philosophers to combat climate change by integrating it into our teaching, research, service, and community engagement. A focus on theoretical progress, citizenship, expertise, virtue, ability, social role, or power, rather than on skill, can allow for some of these contributions. But the skill view, I argue, uniquely captures the breadth of philosophers' role in climate change; promises to make us more effective in practice; and offers a compelling way to overcome our own lingering climate denial by integrating climate change into all aspects of philosophical activity.*

KEYWORDS: climate change, sustainability, institutions, justice, metaphilosophy

Many people feel a baffled contempt toward climate change deniers. Who would so blatantly disregard a broad scientific consensus? What are these people thinking? I had those questions, until I read Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything* (2014). Klein's introduction offers what was, to me, a fundamentally different way of understanding denial. I thought deniers were people who asserted a negation—in this case, that climate change is not real or not caused by humans. Klein describes a constant 'looking away', or inability to face something, that is much closer to denial in grief (Cohen 2001: 8; Norgaard 2011: 10–11). When we lose a loved one, we can usually tell others that the person has died. We rarely say that she is still alive. But we can still be in denial, in the sense that we have not yet integrated the loss into our lives. We reach for the phone to share good news with her; she occurs to us when we wonder who to travel with; we cannot take in that she is gone.

Reading Klein's introduction brought me one of my most memorable moments of conceptual change. I put down the book and thought: *I am* a climate change denier. All my friends are climate change deniers. *We* are the deniers. We say it is real, but we rarely feel or act like it is. We go to an airline website to book a weekend trip; we still think we might see the Great Barrier Reef some day; we have no plans that match the scale of the change. We are climate change deniers.

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This was a conceptual and, in a way, a philosophical shift, that changed the course of my life. Reconceiving denial led me to become more interested in climate change and to look directly at its stunning impacts. It led me into climate activism. I am not sure whether I am still a climate change denier. But this is one example of a philosophical change of mind with a tangible impact. And it raises a good question: In the context of climate change, what would the absence of denial be?

In what follows, I ask that question as a philosopher and offer an answer. We know that climate change raises many philosophical issues. The climate crisis presents what Stephen Gardiner (2006, 2011) has called a 'perfect moral storm', combining a global tragedy of the commons, scientific uncertainty, major economic impacts, unequal vulnerabilities, and crises for current and future generations, nonhuman animals, and the rest of nature. Philosophers are particularly well positioned to help stop the worst effects of climate change. Many writers take part in larger conversations that have the potential to reach a much wider audience. Most teachers have the ear of large numbers of students whose interests and priorities we help to shape. Many teachers at the college and university level decide what large numbers of people will read. Philosophers have many of these opportunities and the skills to use them. We have many years of specific training in assessing arguments, drawing connections between seemingly disparate topics, facilitating discussion and critical thinking, and articulating a compelling rationale when there is one to be articulated. We have already developed a thriving and varied literature on many of the key problems presented by climate change (Light and Rolston 2003; Clowney and Mosto 2009; Thompson and Bendik-Keymer 2012a; Hourdequin 2015; Gardiner and Thompson 2017; Whyte n.d.). But we have said relatively little about our own role as philosophers.

This is unfortunate. The role of philosophers in climate change is a large and complex topic, in need of systematic philosophical treatment. It is a part of metaphilosophy—as Søren Overgaard, Paul Gilbert, and Stephen Burwood (2013: vii) put it, 'the branch of philosophy that asks what philosophy is, how it should be done and why we should do it'. The question of what role philosophers should play in climate change is itself a question about the methods and value of philosophy, or of how philosophy should be done. It also raises questions about the nature of philosophy. These metaphilosophical questions quickly lead to questions in applied ethics and political philosophy concerning responsibility and participation in institutions and to questions about skill and expertise. The topic is also distinct from more often discussed topics such as the distribution of responsibility or the demandingness of morality, in asking *how* to play a role, rather than *who* should or to what extent. And it offers a fresh opportunity to reflect on many aspects of philosophical practice, in the context of a crucial and pressing issue. Philosophers often make brief comments about the role of philosophers in climate change; but many of those comments do not withstand sustained reflection. We have powerful reasons to think more systematically about our role in climate change, and to do it soon. In what follows, I introduce, illustrate, and defend what I call the 'skill view', arguing that focusing on

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philosophical skill is a particularly useful way to approach the role of philosophers in climate change.

It is natural to ask why this discussion is limited to philosophers. Should everyone not apply their skills to climate change as they are able? I focus on philosophers for four reasons. First, I think the skill view is best considered concretely—by examining the particular skills of a group of people—even if it is true of everyone. Second, the topic is partly metaphilosophical, raising questions not only about responses to crisis but also about the nature and value of philosophy. These questions are important to consider on their own terms. Third, generalization can be too hasty. Graphic designers, janitors, therapists, and librarians all have skills to contribute in responding to climate change. But some landed gentry might focus on their wealth or power more productively than on their skills. Characteristic philosophical skills such as crafting arguments and facilitating discussions are particularly needed in challenging large numbers of people to appreciate the importance of climate change. Fourth, most philosophers need a push to appreciate the relevance of our characteristic skills to climate change, and to think in more detailed ways about how we can best contribute. Many of us are waiting for scientists, journalists, and politicians to handle climate change, or assuming that nothing will help. For these reasons, I offer the skill view as particularly appropriate and needed among philosophers. But I think and hope that it can be applied much more broadly, and that this is one of its advantages.

1. Three Conceptions

One natural conception of the role of philosophers in climate change can be called the *theoretical progress view*: philosophers should contribute to addressing climate change primarily by making progress on the difficult ethical, epistemological, metaphysical, conceptual, and other philosophical problems it raises. J. Baird Callicott (2010: 34–35), for example, writes: 'So, who can lift the world out of the environmental crisis? Everybody has to do what they can, but the most important and fundamental job falls to us philosophers. It is our job to dig up, expose to view, and subject to criticism the flawed ideas about the nature of nature, human nature, and the proper relationship between humans and nature that we have inherited from the past'.

On this view, philosophers have a vital role to play, by exposing and criticizing the deeply held ideas that have led to climate change and other environmental crises. As Holmes Rolston (2010: 41) puts it: 'Environmental ethics is vital because the survival of life on Earth depends on it'. These writers do not say that only theory is useful, or that philosophers' other activities, such as teaching, are entirely irrelevant. But their remarks suggest an emphasis on theory. If philosophers have the most important and fundamental job—if the survival of life on Earth now depends on philosophy—that job is unlikely to turn on reaching the small fraction of students who take environmental ethics courses, or even philosophy courses more generally. Our role, according to these writers, seems to be primarily to produce writing that undermines and replaces the 'flawed ideas' that result in climate change.

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It is natural to feel that these remarks are overstated. Surely scientists, politicians, journalists, activists, artists, and others have essential roles as well. But more importantly, I think, such views can easily *under*describe the possible contributions of philosophers. A focus on theoretical progress suggests a narrow picture of *which* philosophers have an important role to play; a philosopher of mathematics might seem to have little or nothing to contribute. More generally, a focus on theoretical progress tends to ignore our role as teachers and administrators, remaining silent on the importance of teaching and community membership and offering little guidance about them. We might hope for a view that offers all philosophers something to do in various areas within and outside our jobs.

Particular theoretical approaches partly address these concerns. Fergus Green and Eric Brandstedt (2021: 540) and others advocate for '*engaged methods*—methods of doing political theory that involve substantial interaction between the theorist and an actual or potential agent of change'. A growing tradition of 'field philosophy' offers closely related approaches (see, for example, Brister and Frodeman 2020; Brister 2021). In pragmatist traditions, as Jason Kawall (2017: 19) puts it, 'Ecopragmatists are committed to environmental ethics becoming more effective in shaping public policy and attitudes'. I make no objection to any of these theoretical approaches. But, as engaged philosophers, field philosophers, and ecopragmatists can agree, a conception of the role of philosophers in climate change should include, in addition to theoretical progress, contributions as teachers and administrators, which can be either championed or ignored by advocates of particular theoretical approaches.

Resisting a focus on theoretical writing, one might instead accept what I call an *ordinary citizen view*: philosophers should contribute to addressing climate change primarily through lifestyle changes and political activity, rather than *as* philosophers. We can stop eating beef and cheese, use less and cleaner energy, and cut down on travel. We can protest, donate, and vote. Those of us who are highly paid academics with large houses and busy flying schedules can prevent especially large harms to the environment by reducing our own carbon footprint and by donating to organizations that fight climate change. Surely these roles are important. When change is urgently needed, might these not be the most important contributions we can make?

This view offers an important counterbalance to the theoretical progress view, by emphasizing the nonphilosophical contributions philosophers can make as people. It also offers another advantage. If anyone worries that it underemphasizes the importance of theoretical progress, the ordinary citizen view is easily combined with the theoretical progress view into a *hybrid view*, on which philosophers should contribute both through theoretical progress and as individual community members. Still, I think, both the ordinary citizen view and the hybrid view are importantly inadequate. Both these views still ignore the contributions we can make as teachers and administrators. They also ignore the ways in which our work in theory can inform our efforts in advocacy and activism. The hybrid view is a conjunction view, with theory and citizenship as two seemingly unrelated parts. It compartmentalizes central components of our lives and work, rather than

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offering a fruitful way to integrate them. And it leads to missed opportunities. We can still rightly ask the important questions: What can philosophers do as teachers and administrators? And how can *philosophers* be effective as individual citizens?

I propose that we accept, instead, a *skill view*: philosophers should contribute to addressing climate change primarily through the use of our philosophical skills. By 'philosophical skills', I mean the skills philosophers characteristically develop and use as part of doing philosophy. Some of these are the skills of philosophical writing. Philosophers have years of practice in assessing arguments, drawing connections between seemingly disparate topics, coming up with useful and well-chosen examples, collecting and summarizing the writing of others, finding and addressing objections, articulating a compelling rationale when there is one to be articulated, and presenting that rationale persuasively. Other characteristic philosophical skills are ones we develop as teachers and advisors in areas such as facilitating discussion, public speaking, presenting ideas in accessible ways, building relationships with young people, supporting others to develop and defend their views, and challenging people to think critically about some of their most strongly held beliefs. Finally, many philosophers have skills as administrators and members of institutions and larger organizations through experience serving on committees, organizing events, working with a range of colleagues, and running departments and educational programs. These skills are not distinctive of philosophers, in the sense of being unique to us. But they are characteristic of philosophers: doing philosophy tends to develop and exercise them. Noticing these skills allows us to ask how they can be useful in the context of climate change, and to put the answers to use in our own case.

What is a skill? As Carlotta Pavese (2021: §9.1) puts it, 'by and large people take skills to manifest in purposeful and goal-directed activities and to be learnable and improvable through practice'. There is an active debate in philosophy about the nature of skill and about the extent to which features such as behavioral complexity, expression in intentional action, guidance by knowledge, and improvement through practice are required for something to count as a skill (see the contributions in Fridland and Pavese 2021). I am inclined to agree with Ellen Fridland (2021: 247) that 'skills, in virtue of their peculiar learning histories, rely on control structures that give rise to characteristic, controlled, intelligent actions'. But others might count breathing, vision, and various automatic processes as skills whereas Fridland and I would not. This disagreement might seem troubling. If, as Pavese (2021: §9.1) adds, 'there is no consensus on what counts as a skill', can we understand the skill view well enough to evaluate it?

Fortunately, the skill view makes no claims about the range of the broader genus 'skill' and does not ask us to accept any view about skills more generally. Instead, it brings our focus to characteristic philosophical skills, such as crafting arguments and facilitating discussion, which clearly are behaviorally complex, expressed in intentional action, guided by knowledge, and developed through practice. In this context, we can put aside concerns about borderline cases of skill, such as breathing, to consider which skills are philosophical skills, and which skills are especially needed in the context of climate change. The crucial issue will be the range of philosophers' characteristic skills, rather than the range of skill in

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general. Still, it is useful to notice that the philosophical skills I have mentioned display paradigmatic features of skill and, especially, that they are learned and improve through practice.

Since philosophical skills include skills in philosophical writing, the skill view includes the contributions emphasized by the theoretical progress view. It disagrees with that view not by denying the importance of theoretical contributions, but by rejecting a narrowly theory-centered conception of the value of philosophy. Because it tells us to apply our skills in a range of efforts, the skill view also includes contributions emphasized by the ordinary citizen view. It certainly does not tell us *not* to contribute in these ways, although, as I discuss below, it de-emphasizes some of them in favor of others. But unlike the theoretical progress view, the ordinary citizen view, and the hybrid view, it also includes our role as teachers and administrators, and it promises to tell us more about *how* to contribute as writers, teachers, administrators, and citizens.

2. Five Proposals

In what follows, I propose five ways in which a wide range of philosophers can use some of our philosophical skills in response to climate change. These proposals are not our only options; but they offer an organized set of practical suggestions, and illustrate the skill view.[1]

First, philosophers can use our skills in constructing arguments, presenting examples, and finding connections between topics to *integrate climate change into our teaching and research*, including teaching and research on seemingly unrelated topics. As climate change has a greater and greater impact on almost every area of thought and life, philosophy can lead, rather than fall behind, in offering its students opportunities to think through these impacts, from introductions to philosophy, ethics, or logic to advanced courses in epistemology, philosophy of science, moral psychology, aesthetics, diversity and oppression, and many different historical traditions. We can integrate climate change into a similarly wide range of writing, by including a chapter, section, or a few paragraphs on the often very significant relation of our particular topic to climate change. In both teaching and research, climate change is a key illustration, application, test case, motivation, or complication for views in many different areas. The more we come to see climate change as central, the more we will see it as relevant to almost every area of philosophy.

Second, I propose that we use our background in leading discussions and organizing events to *hold events on climate change for our larger community*. Some of these can be for a larger philosophical community. Philosophy undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and nonacademic philosophers can use more opportunities to talk about climate change and about our role in it, and to find collaborators with whom to think through and initiate sustainability

[1] Parts of an earlier version of this section have been integrated into the American Philosophical Association's *Good Practices Guide* (2020: 95–102), which offers a helpful range of specific suggestions for integrating sustainability into philosophy courses, events, and department life.

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initiatives. If we can use workshops on diversity and inclusion in philosophy, we can use similar workshops on sustainable practices, or on both in tandem. These events can be an effective way to bring together philosophers at different levels of experience and in neighboring communities. On the other hand, there is no need to lead discussions only for philosophers. Most of us have a background in leading discussions for a wider range of participants; we can organize and facilitate discussions for neighborhoods, places of worship, or towns or cities. Many environmental groups are eager to recruit new leaders and facilitators.

Third, I propose that we use our skills as administrators, committee members, and advisors to *support climate change organizations* both on and off campus. Student groups can often use encouragement, logistical support, and formal and informal advising as they form, grow, recruit, and take action. Off-campus groups are often hungry for student participants and access to campuses. Some minimal support can help others have a significant impact. Many philosophers already advise, organize events and presentations, and serve on committees. We can do the same with climate change groups, or consult with them as needed. And we can offer them our other skills by, for example, offering to attend, support, or lead discussions on climate change for the general public, or by writing letters to newspapers or officials in support of their causes.

Fourth, I propose that we use our skills, both in argumentation and in institutional service, to *advocate for sustainable practices in departments and larger organizations*. Many organizations pay little attention to sustainability, largely because their members do not seem to care. Philosophers who are department members can organize a group of other members to hold or recommend an e-conference or e-colloquium series, or advocate for plant-based catering, carbon offsets for faculty travel, recycling, better food-waste management, particular course offerings, or a department policy on sustainability. Employees of institutions of higher learning can help advocate for incorporating sustainable practices on a campus as a whole, everywhere from energy use to investment to curriculum requirements. Members of larger philosophical associations can encourage them to adopt, strengthen, and follow sustainability guidelines in general and on particular issues. Philosophers with relevant expertise can contribute to large projects and gatherings related to climate change, and play a role in policy decisions. And we can encourage others to do the same.

Lastly, I propose that we use our skills in research and collaboration to *collect and share relevant resources*. Organizations such as the International Society for Environmental Ethics and Philosophers for Sustainability collect and share syllabi and other resources. More locally, colleagues and friends may want to know what we have taught or heard of, or what projects are underway in a neighborhood or city.

These proposals have precedents in many efforts by teachers and writers toward civil rights, peace activism, and other causes, such as the large numbers of academic petitions and "teach-ins" during the Vietnam War (McCaughey 1976; the contributions in Marshall and Anderson 2009; Collins 2013). A growing number of models for following them can be found among our colleagues, both individually and in collective undertakings such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, Philosophers for

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Sustainability, Engaged Philosophy, and the Public Philosophy Network. They also illustrate the skill view, and they suggest a range of ways in which acting on it might be useful.

Still, the skill view needs clarification and defense on several key points. In the next two sections I address some natural doubts about the view and its justification, first turning to more general concerns about an emphasis on skill and then considering some questions about which skills to use.

3. Why Skills?

Why focus on philosophical skill? To defend the skill view, one might appeal to a utilitarian, Kantian, virtue-centered, or other ethical theory and argue that it recommends that philosophers emphasize their characteristic skills in responding to climate change. But I think adherents of many ethical theories should accept the skill view. So instead of assuming or defending one larger theory, I will offer a different defense of the skill view that can appeal to adherents of a range of ethical theories.

Imagine a philosophy professor who acts on the hybrid view. She is beginning to write about climate change, and she donates to climate organizations, supplementing theoretical progress with contributions as an individual citizen. But she misses opportunities to discuss climate denial in her social epistemology course, advocate for sustainable practices by departmental committees she serves on, and prioritize online or hybrid conferences over long-distance flying. She orders beef sandwich platters for colloquium receptions because that is what her department does. She cares about climate change and tries to reduce her own emissions, but her teaching and service are still business as usual.

There are many reasons for this professor to shift her focus to applying her philosophical skills more broadly to climate change. In a broadly utilitarian spirit, we might say that her doing so would have good effects, and, more specifically, would help prevent a great deal of suffering, both by reducing high-carbon activities and by fostering useful discussion and critical reflection among her students and colleagues. Kantians or contractualists might emphasize that her department's current flying and catering practices not only allow or enable harm, but *do* highly significant harm (Korsgaard 2018: 220–25; van Ewijk and Hoekman 2021). Harming others is generally harder to justify than allowing or enabling harm, even if one also avoids or prevents harm in other contexts (Woollard 2012). Following the hybrid view may also make it harder to meet obligations to her students or her institution; many university and departmental mission statements set a goal of preparing future generations for the challenges of the contemporary world, and it is difficult to meet this goal without challenging students to understand and reflect on climate change in a range of contexts. Finally, as a virtue ethicist might suggest, integrating climate change more fully into her work life will likely counteract her own lingering climate denial, along with associated vices such as greed, cowardice, and injustice (Thompson and Bendik-Keymer 2012b: 8–19; Kawall 2012). She can resist all of these vices, and

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show courage and initiative, by making an argument for exploring e-conferencing options or plant-based catering.

The skill view is especially suited not to a single ethical theory, but to the problem of climate change. Climate change is both urgent and pervasive, requiring 'rapid and unprecedented societal transformation' to reduce and adapt to its catastrophic damage (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018: ch. 1, 76). The five proposals I described respond directly to these two features. Like many other skills, philosophical skills take many years to develop, but much less time to exercise. The skill view encourages philosophers to draw on years of training that we already have and in ways that can be implemented much more quickly. At the same time, the skill view is comprehensive, applying a broad range of philosophical skills: both expertise and more general competences, on and off campus, and in research, teaching, and service. Drawing on our skills in these ways, philosophers can have a broad impact by challenging a wide range of people and organizations to think through and act on the implications of climate change for their own activity.

While these considerations present an initial case for the skill view, one might wonder whether they would support a different response just as well or even better. Before turning to questions about which skills to emphasize, it is worth asking whether some other alternative might be preferable to an emphasis on skill.

Rather than focusing on skill, one might think, it might be better for philosophers to focus on *expertise*—on the relevant areas of philosophy each of us knows best (see Stichter 2015; the contributions in Ericsson, Hoffman, and Kozbelt 2018; Driver 2021). In their contribution to a special journal issue on academics standing against poverty, Thomas Pogge and Luis Cabrera (2012: 171) emphasize that many 'academics undertake years of intensive training in subject and method, and their substantive knowledge may be equal to or even exceed that of the policy-makers, journalists, and others who do the lion's share of issue-framing salient to poverty alleviation'. Simon Caney (2012) suggests that academics can offer two key resources—expertise and credibility as experts—and can contribute in ways such as critiquing and explaining methods for measuring climate change, normative frameworks, and individual charities.

These are excellent practical suggestions, and the skill view encourages us to act on them when we can. But they offer no reason to ignore our other philosophical skills. In documents such as CVs, academic philosophers distinguish 'areas of specialization', in which they claim expertise, from 'areas of competence', in which they claim ability to teach courses in a subject area. In addition to these specific competences, we also have more general competences, such as facilitating discussion, evaluating arguments, and organizing events. Focusing more narrowly on expertise ignores the relevance of these competences. It may also encourage some philosophers to engage in what Klein (2014: 187) calls 'magical thinking', by waiting for scientists, or billionaires, or, in this case, experts, to save Earth from climate change. Specialists in philosophical logic, or in ancient philosophy, do not need to leave climate change to experts in ethics or philosophy of science. They can implement all five of the proposals I describe above. The skill view includes the important contributions of philosophical expertise as part of a much

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broader range of contributions that rely on expertise, areas of competence, and more general philosophical skills.

Instead of skill or expertise, one might instead focus on virtue. Why not aim to respond to climate change with courage, honesty, and justice, or perhaps with some more specifically philosophical virtues? Moreover, some philosophers have come to think that 'virtues are skills' (Stichter 2018: 3; see Annas 2011: 1). Is the skill view distinct from a virtue view, and if so, is it preferable?

The distinction is not hard to draw. Even if virtues are skills, not all skills are virtues. At a minimum, virtue requires a relatively high degree of skill, making it natural to draw a 'comparison of the virtuous person to experts in a skill' (Stichter 2018: 3). Even at a high level of skill, some kinds of expertise, such as expertise in social epistemology, do not obviously qualify as virtues. But all of the proposals I make above require competence or at most specialization rather than excellence. Like focusing on expertise, focusing on virtue is again likely to lead to many missed opportunities that require lesser or different forms of skill. Cultivating or exercising virtues we do not yet have can also be daunting or unfeasible, especially within the tight timeframe of responses to climate change. So if many philosophers think we lack the relevant virtues, an emphasis on applying these virtues to climate change can obscure the ways in which everyone can usefully contribute. It can also encourage many philosophers to engage in yet another form of magical thinking, by waiting for a special group of virtuous philosophers to address the problem.

Instead of narrowing our focus to expertise or virtue, we could instead broaden it to ability or capacity more generally, and say that philosophers should contribute as they are able. 'Skill' can seem too narrow a notion, just as 'expertise' does. Should philosophers not also make use of abilities that are not skills, such as the ability to pay (see Miller 2001; Caney 2014)? This question can resist a focus on specifically *philosophical* skills; writing a check is itself a skill, though not a philosophical one. But one can also doubt that, in contributions such as writing a check, we should focus on skill at all, rather than our assets and the abilities they give us. Either way, a broader focus on relevant abilities can seem to leave more room for the contributions emphasized by the ordinary citizen view. Key contributions such as donating, voting, attending protests, cutting travel, changing eating habits, and monitoring energy use can seem to require no special skills, or at least no philosophical ones. Why de-emphasize these in favor of more philosophical contributions? And why describe these contributions in terms of skill at all?

To answer these questions, we can begin by observing that all six of these examples are complex activities that raise their own difficult questions. Donate to whom? Cut which foods and which travel? How important is plastic? What makes a good protest sign? The difficulties are both empirical and ethical. To address them, it is useful to collect and evaluate resources, share the best resources with others, have discussions with friends and collaborators, and make reflective, informed decisions that accommodate a range of values, all while managing one's time to balance these activities, and the research into them, with one's other goals. It seems naïve to think that characteristically philosophical skills are not useful

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here. If we have those skills, we should use them. Skill is needed to see which abilities are relevant, and to decide how to use them.

We also know that the primary sources of damage to the earth's climate are collective organizations such as governments and corporations (Heede 2014). When I lead discussions of climate change, I am often struck by the extent to which participants are inclined to think *only* about reducing their individual flying, plastic, or home energy use. Philosophical skills such as crafting arguments, leading discussions, and organizing events are especially useful for encouraging others to think through and prioritize the most pressing needs for collective action, changing the minds of communities of people and shifting public policy. In other words, philosophical skills are particularly useful both within individual lifestyle changes, and in prioritizing and advocating for larger collective change.

Focusing on philosophical skill thus offers several advantages over focusing on ability more generally. First, it offers practical guidance, by telling us which abilities to prioritize. Second, it emphasizes abilities that are needed for the social and institutional changes that are especially crucial in the case of climate crisis. Third, it offers philosophers much-needed reminders of the relevance of our training, and of the particular social and institutional contributions we are positioned to make. Fourth, it addresses the metaphilosophical question with which we started. What can philosophy, as an activity or discipline, do in the face of climate change? The skill view offers an answer. Philosophy can evaluate methods and arguments, connect seemingly disparate topics, generate discussion, and so on. The skill view offers a rich set of relevant and impactful possible contributions by philosophy as a discipline, and it reminds philosophers to use our philosophical skills even as ordinary citizens.

Instead of expertise or ability, one might also consider a conception centered on social role. According to Robin Zheng's role-ideal model, 'we are, each of us, individually responsible for structural injustice through and in virtue of our social roles' (2018: 873). Zheng emphasizes that role is 'the site where structure meets agency' (870, 876), and argues that, compared to a focus on power, privilege, interest, or ability, 'Social roles . . . take us further towards specification because they are rich in content, which allows them to be action-guiding. For every role, there is some intuitive, salient, and relatively circumscribed range of associated actions' (Zheng 2018: 879). 'Philosopher' is, among other things, a social role. Might the role of philosophers in climate change not be best understood by thinking about the role of philosophers more generally?

An emphasis on social role is in some ways closely related to an emphasis on skill. The 'philosopher' role develops and maintains philosophical skills, and offers many opportunities to use them. Like the skill view, reflection on our social role encourages detailed reflection on various aspects of our activity as philosophers. But it is worth noticing that Zheng proposes a model of responsibility, not meant to 'adjudicate between role-ideals' (2018: 876), or to choose between conflicting evaluative conceptions of the best way to play a particular social role. When we ask how to respond to climate change, as a practical question, there are several reasons not to look mainly to our social role as philosophers for an answer. First, simply following the commonly accepted norms or expectations of one's role can lead to

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conservatism or blind obedience. An appropriate response to climate change may often call for what Lisa Herzog calls 'transformational agency', or 'taking active responsibility for the moral quality of one's role' (2018: 202). As Zheng (2018: 878) puts it, 'Constructing a role-ideal requires *critical reflection* on the purposes and aims of the role, how it might be modified to better achieve them, what auxiliary roles should be created or modified, and how to collaborate with others possessing similar aims'. Critical reflection is a paradigmatic philosophical skill. Second, even within the 'philosopher' role, we need to be reminded to ask what skills we have, and how we can use them to combat climate change. The skill view focuses directly on this question. Finally, philosophy is not only a social role; it is an activity, using characteristic skills, which we can also engage in outside the social role of philosopher. If we join a youth-led project off-campus, our attempting to lead discussion, share extensive expertise, or even disclose that we are philosophers can sometimes be intimidating, dominating, or counterproductive. We can still contribute our philosophical skills as needed, but in a different role, as an ally or supporter. Focusing primarily on our social role as philosophers rather than on our skills can lead us to miss or misuse these opportunities.

Similar considerations apply to a focus on power. When 'power' does not simply mean 'ability', it often refers to social power or influence. But consider what happens when our skills diverge from the social power we have as philosophers. A philosopher who has recently left academia may no longer have much access to teaching students or influencing universities or philosophy associations. But she can still use her skills in many of the same ways in making arguments and holding discussions outside academia, advocating for change, and collecting and sharing resources. On the other hand, a prestigious philosophy professor may have all the power a philosopher can have. Which aspects of her craft she should focus on in the context of climate change will depend greatly on her skills. If she is an outstanding administrator and advocate, she may have the biggest impact by working to convince her university to divest from fossil fuels, change carbon-intensive building projects, or add a required course on sustainability for all undergraduates. If she is a leading theorist who struggles as a teacher, she may do best by focusing on her writing. Looking to our skills is a particularly useful way of guiding deliberation in the complex context of climate change.

Of course, focusing on philosophical skill alone will not address all our practical questions; we will have to use our judgment, our moral theories, and our empirical knowledge to make decisions about how best to use our skills. Theoretical progress, contributions as ordinary citizens, expertise, virtue, ability, social role, and power will all be relevant. But giving any of these factors pride of place is likely to lead to many missed opportunities. A conception of the role of philosophers in climate change should include contributions in research, teaching, and service, across many subfields, on and off campus, within and outside our established social roles, using both our expertise and our other philosophical competences. A broad range of diverse contributions, together with useful practical guidance, is likely to have a larger impact than a conception that leaves many of them out. By offering both diversity and guidance and by drawing on extensive training we already

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have, a focus on philosophical skill is especially likely to lead us to engage effectively with climate change.

4. Which Skills?

I turn now to some more specific concerns about which skills to prioritize. These concerns raise other objections to the skill view, and offer opportunities to resolve some common confusions.

Focusing on *philosophical* skill can seem futile or ineffective if one is worried about being a bad philosopher or lacking the requisite skills. Some philosophers are terrible writers. Some never become good teachers. Many of us lack basic social skills. Perhaps we should focus on donating after all. What good is focusing on our philosophical skills, if we (mostly) do not have them?

This concern is especially pressing for a view that emphasizes philosophical virtue or excellence, which many of us worry that we do not have. But philosophical skills more generally are exercised and developed whenever one engages in philosophy. It is extremely rare—if it is possible at all—for philosophers actively engaged in writing or teaching to completely lack even basic competence in every aspect of philosophy, such as argumentation, critical reflection, articulating connections between ideas, and facilitating discussion. Usually, the lack is partial. We can then ask, as before, which skills we do have. We may even have time to cultivate some relevant skills deliberately by, for example, finding mentors or attending workshops or training sessions that might help us be effective.

Still, there are some cases of severe and wide-ranging incompetence among philosophers. There are also philosophers who are exceptionally talented as artists or programmers, and can more effectively focus on those other skills in responding to climate change. The skill view tells philosophers to address climate change *primarily* by using our philosophical skills. But like the view that dogs have four legs, the skill view can allow some exceptions. Philosophers who are sure they are severely incompetent as philosophers—or exceptionally skilled in other domains—can sometimes helpfully focus on their other, nonphilosophical skills, or simply on voting, protesting, or donating.

Looking to philosophical skills can also seem misguided or ineffective in cases of uncertainty. What if we are not sure which skills we have, or which ones to use, or whether we have philosophical skills at all? We might not have catalogued and ranked our own philosophical abilities, and for many of us, climate change is new, offering unfamiliar challenges and applications of our previous experience. Can the skill view offer guidance? In its one-sentence formulation, it does not; but I think it naturally leads to some useful guidance in situations of uncertainty. The injunction to ask what skills we have is itself a kind of guidance. It tells us to think about our skills, rather than simply donating or voting. We can then articulate and enact proposals like the ones I make above; and we can each consider our skills individually, to help determine how we can be most effective. A lack of additional guidance can also be useful in leading us to ask others for collaboration and advice, and in encouraging us to be experimental. We may not know how best to apply our skills until we make a few different

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attempts and see what works. Here uncertainty is not a fatal problem but a natural early stage in applying one's skills. It offers no reason to reject a view or to stop trying.

Focusing on *philosophical* skill can seem troublingly slow within the context of an urgent crisis. Good philosophy takes time; do we have enough time? This concern seems especially pressing if one accepts a metaphilosophical view that identifies philosophy with the production of philosophical writing. It is true that good philosophical writing can take years to draft, years to revise, and years to publish. Integrating climate change into philosophical research can sometimes take a decade or more. In the context of climate change, this can seem useful, but far too little and far too slow. But as we saw, the exercise of philosophical skill extends far beyond the publication of philosophical research. Here it helps to return to the five proposals I offer. Incorporating climate change into a syllabus or assignment, organizing a workshop on sustainable practices, engaging with a climate organization, initiating or participating in an advocacy project, and gathering or sharing resources can all be done within the timeframe of a few months. Urgency may help us decide which philosophical skills to use and how, but it does not present a general objection to the use of philosophical skills. The skill view exploits many years of *previous* training with activities that can mostly be undertaken relatively quickly. Still, concerns about urgency are useful in reminding us not to overemphasize writing or research over other forms of philosophical activity such as teaching or discussion.

In recent discussions of activism and climate change, philosophers have shown a closely related tendency to emphasize philosophical skills related to producing arguments. David Miller (2008: 119) writes that 'What philosophers are uniquely positioned to do is to spell out the reasons we have to change our behavior to avoid damaging climate change'. According to Andrew Light (2002: 559), 'if philosophers could help to articulate moral foundations for environmental policies in a way that is translatable to the general public, they will have made a contribution to the resolution of environmental problems commensurate with their talents and in a fashion compatible with the work of other environmental professionals'. Here again, '[t]he goal is to come up with ethical grounds upon which environmental policies can be justified' (Light 2002: 562). In a more general discussion of activism among philosophers, Julinna Oxley (2020: 12) writes that 'while philosophers have a range of distinctive skills, their argumentation skills broadly construed (including rational evaluation) are particularly valuable and can be used to contribute to activist movements'. On her view, 'Philosophers are uniquely suited to do the rational persuasion dimension of activist movements' (2020: 16).

In times of denial, defensiveness, and fear, one might worry that a philosopher's arguments will not be what persuades the public. Even if they can be made quickly, arguments can backfire, or simply not be what is needed. Oxley (2020: 17) notes that '[a] major objection to my view is that it is unduly optimistic about the potential for the public to be persuaded by reason'. She replies that 'although people do make decisions based on emotional appeal, in the end, we are also rational beings', who can be convinced over time, if philosophers 'continue to use good reasons and

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think about long-term beliefs and strategies for achieving stable epistemic states' (2020: 12). But in the context of climate change, one might still worry that good reasons are ineffective, and the long term is too long.

This concern can appear to be a doubt about the value of philosophy more generally. It can also express a metaphilosophical view on which philosophy is mainly the production of arguments. But as considering the skill view brings out, the nature and value of philosophy, and of philosophical skills, extends beyond producing arguments, either in writing or in teaching or conversation. Most philosophers have years of experience in facilitating discussion without offering arguments of their own, including encouraging others to offer and analyze examples, bringing out the underlying motivations for a thought, and helping others make connections among their own ideas. We are experienced teaching assistants, not only lecturers. Even as lecturers, many of us use the Socratic method or in-class activities designed to get students talking and thinking through their own views rather than listening to ours. So if people need to talk more than they need to listen, we have relevant skills to offer (see American Philosophical Association 2020: 26; Brister 2021: 4–6). An emphasis on theoretical progress can easily lead us to miss this point; so can an emphasis on expertise, since most philosophers are not experts or specialists in facilitation, in the sense of writing about it or being familiar with the latest research on pedagogy. Although offering arguments can be effective, the skill view reminds us that excellence or competence in facilitating discussion can be especially useful in leading people to think through the implications of climate change.

If our skills are useful in these contexts, they are also especially useful in our own jobs. When many of us are so overworked and intellectually exhausted, we may want to conserve the more difficult uses of our skills for our normal philosophical activities. In addressing climate change, should we focus on skills we find relatively easy to use?

One response to this concern about conservation emphasizes the scale of the climate crisis: without 'rapid and far-reaching' transitions in the next several years, we face dramatic increases in projected warming, death, displacement from uninhabitable land, runaway feedback loops, ice-free Arctic summers, and catastrophic 'natural' disasters almost everywhere (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018: ch. 3, 205–53). Becoming more informed about climate change can make us doubt that our skills are more needed anywhere else. But I think this response ignores a legitimate concern about making environmental efforts sustainable in individual lives, so that we do not become burned out, miserable, and ineffective. In addressing concerns about exhaustion, I prefer to emphasize not the scale of the crisis, but the importance of *integrating* climate change into daily life. Burnout is most likely when we take on a large additional burden. Addressing climate change can be the *way* we sometimes write, talk, construct syllabi, plan class meetings or receptions, hold conferences, or engage with a broader community. The five proposals I outline describe ways of engaging in these activities. Putting the proposals into practice can be part of a 9-to-5 routine, draw on skills we already have, show both competence and initiative on the job, and earn professional credit. Using our skills to integrate climate change

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into philosophy offers ways to counteract denial, have a larger impact, build careers, and avoid burnout. We do not need to focus on the philosophical skills we find least exhausting to use. Instead, we can integrate climate change into the ways we apply all of our skills.

The skill view can address these various questions about which skills to emphasize. Still, the questions suggest one important qualification to the view. In using our skills to help combat climate change, we will probably have to do things at which we are not (yet) skilled. Talking to others can lead us to discover more vividly that conversations about climate change can be extremely emotionally charged, raising powerful confusions, discouragement, grief, and fear about nature, our own survival, and the future of our families. Effective communication about climate might require a degree of warmth and trust (Lamb and Lane 2016: 231), emotional vulnerability (Goldberg, Gustafson, and Sander 2020: 315), or tact or fun (Oxley 2020: 20–22) that are (unfortunately) not characteristically philosophical. Or we might find ourselves in contexts that require unfamiliar kinds of community organizing. We may or may not be skilled at handling these situations. Here, the skill view never tells us to do *only* what we are already good at. It should not be abused as an excuse to limit ourselves exclusively to the areas of our existing skills. Our philosophical skills are an excellent starting point, allowing us to draw on years of relevant training. But to match the pace of climate change, we will likely need to try new activities, or new versions of familiar ones, before we feel ready. My emphasis on our philosophical skills is meant not to rationalize hesitation, but to get us to notice that we *can* do a great deal of immediate good, and that we should try.

5. Conclusion

Focusing on philosophical skills is an especially useful way to approach the role of philosophers in climate change. Alternatives that emphasize theoretical progress, citizenship, expertise, virtue, ability, social role, or power tend to leave out many important contributions, and often fail to offer helpful practical guidance or to emphasize contributions that lead to collective action. Reflecting individually on our own skills, collaborating with others, and willingness to experiment can help resolve doubts about our own skills. While one might have concerns about the effectiveness of offering arguments, it is important to keep in mind our skills in other aspects of philosophy, especially in facilitating discussion. Concerns about the need to conserve the use of our skills can be addressed not only by the urgency of climate change but also by the abundant opportunities for integrating climate change into ongoing philosophical work. Drawing on our extensive training, we can offer a broad range of ways to combat climate change by affecting both individual behavior and collective action.

The skill view can be applied with various degrees of energy and commitment, and combined with a variety of views about the demandingness of morality. An especially demanding view might require quitting our jobs, or taking drastic measures. I doubt most professional philosophers should quit our jobs, considering the many philosophical problems raised by climate change and the

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central importance of educating and supporting students in this period. But even philosophers who do quit their job—or cannot find one—should continue to draw on their philosophical skills in responding to climate change. Similarly, philosophers who are overburdened, marginalized, or face heavy institutional barriers to climate advocacy should draw on their philosophical skills as they are able. Hard questions remain about the extent or demandingness of our obligations—but addressing these questions once again requires the use of characteristic philosophical skills.

The skill view is a metaphilosophical view, making a claim about how philosophers should act. Considering it suggests some ways in which philosophy can be valuable, and encourages resistance to identifying philosophy too closely with either writing or argumentation. I think it also encourages viewing philosophy as continuous with other disciplines and pursuits. After considering philosophical skills in some detail, I do not think I have found even one that is unique to philosophers. Although our various skills are developed and exercised by doing philosophy, they are shared by many other writers, teachers, and professionals. So I remain hopeful that the skill view can be usefully applied by many non-philosophers, although I have tried to avoid making any blanket generalizations about other fields without considering them in detail.

For philosophers, the sense that climate change is someone else's issue can be expressed in an expectation that it will be addressed outside philosophy. This sense can also be expressed in an expectation that, within philosophy, climate change will be addressed primarily by environmental philosophers. An emphasis on common philosophical skills, rather than the particular expertise of environmental philosophers, is, among other things, a way of broadening these efforts to all philosophers. Thinking of climate change as primarily an issue for environmental philosophers is, I think, another form of denial or magical thinking. It ignores the many opportunities we all have, and it makes our progress too narrow, too lonely, and too slow.

Stopping climate change is not an activity for someone else—for someone less, or more, immersed in the theoretical issues. It is an activity for all inhabitants of the Earth. Perhaps most of all, at this stage, it is an activity for inhabitants who can effectively challenge other inhabitants to face the scale and importance of climate change. Philosophers are some of those inhabitants. We are not the only ones, and we may not be the smartest or the most important. But for now, I would rather we overestimate our potential than underestimate it. Someone needs to get us—philosophers, and everyone—to make our way out of denial, to appreciate the current situation quickly enough to address it. Fortunately, many of us are good at doing that.

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