Transparency and responsibility: information and environmental citizenship[1]

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To what extent does the availability of accurate and usable information concerning relationships between individual or actions and choices and their environmental impacts promote good environmental citizenship? Does the promotion of environmentally responsible behavior depend upon, or can it be enhanced by, greater transparency about such relationships? Here, I have in mind a model of citizenship that is action-oriented but rooted in a set of core values and beliefs to inform and constrain such actions. A useful model can be seen in what Micheletti and Stolle term *sustainable citizenship*, which expects persons "to give serious consideration to how their beliefs, policies, and practices might reflect and reproduce social and environmental injustices of the past (e.g., from legacies of slavery and colonialism) and how their present practices and lifestyles may have a negative effect on the wellbeing of other humans, nature, and animals today and in the future" (2012, 90). Persons *qua* citizens could potentially enhance this reflexivity between personal actions and values and the social and environmental outcomes to which they contribute through better access to information, which might empower them to more effectively advance civic ends while also providing a stronger motive for doing so.

The working hypothesis of this paper supposes that access to information can affect the disposition of persons to become better environmental citizens, which requires their acceptance of greater personal responsibility for the care of our common environment. I borrow it, along with some of what I take to be its appeal, from Aldo Leopold's discussion of the development and operation of an "ecological conscience" in his revered *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold condemns "a system of conservation based wholly on economic self-interest" as "hopelessly lopsided" in that "it tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning." Only through the cultivation of a sense of ethical obligation to the land itself (his "land ethic") can such a "lopsided" approach be balanced, he suggests. Crucially, he claims that "the most serious obstacle" to the development of such a conscience for most is informational, as the "true modern" is now "separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable

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physical gadgets," and so is blinded to the feedback that a closer connection to ecosystem health once provided for many. Leopold described mid-century Americans as having "no vital relation to" the land, such as they come to view it merely as "the space between cities on which crops grow." Physical separation from the land and the information about its stability and integrity that such relations can yield creates a psychological break from it, he suggests, which prevents the development of the "intense consciousness of land" from which ethical connection arises.

In the turn toward transparency measures within environmental politics, through which new technologies and initiatives have made possible the collection and dissemination of a wide range of information concerning social and environmental impacts or life cycle analyses, the connection between information and environmental citizenship has formed a key premise behind such efforts. As Alabaster and Hawthorne note, "environmental citizenship can therefore be conceptualized as the culmination of the environmental education process, the first stage of which is the acquisition of information" (1999, 25). In this paper, I explore this connection between information disclosure and transparency requirement efforts on the one hand, and the educative processes through which environmental values might be strengthened and motives for engaging in environmental action may be formed. My interest here lies in approaching this premise theoretically, exploring the causal connections that it presumes and well as its normative implications that follow from the power of informational governance.

Information and integrity

How do informational approaches bring about preference transformation and behavioral change, and what does this process imply for questions about responsibility? For purposes of this analysis, I assume that many consumer choices between harmful and relatively benign products are in fact legally delegated to individual persons, not that they ought to be. My intention is not to defend the libertarian claim that harmful social and environmental effects of production be incorporated within markets rather than prohibited as wrongful, nor is it to offer purely informational approaches as alternatives to regulatory ones. While I do find some promise in informational policies like mandatory disclosure and transparency requirements, as well as informational efforts undertaken by NGOs to collect, process, and disseminate data tracking a range of social and environmental impacts, I don't see informational and regulatory approaches as incompatible, and don't accept dogmatic ideological resistance to either. In some

cases, I believe that persons should be relieved of the burdens of social responsibility by laws that disallow particularly harmful or otherwise bad actions or outcomes, and that any costs to personal autonomy are outweighed by benefits from averted evils in those cases. Manufacturing processes or other activities that employ child or slave labor, for example, or which destroy sensitive ecosystems or expose others to significant environmental risk should not merely be clearly identified as such, but should not be permitted at all. Even if persons voluntarily opt to consume such products or engage in such actions in full knowledge of the consequences of their production, as some surely would, the great harm that results from allowing them warrants their ban within civilized societies. But in other cases, such prohibitions are not so clearly warranted, despite clear links between some products or activities and serious harm that results from them.

My interest therefore lies in the moral psychology of informational approaches in those contexts where some less egregiously harmful actions or behaviors are legally allowed, with the ethical questions faced by persons when confronted by such information, and the policy and political implications of these. Here, information is meant to appeal to the value judgments of some (but not all) persons, reporting positive or negative attributes of products they might consume or activities in which they might engage. For example, a carbon footprint label could convey the impacts of rival commodities or services, allowing for some differentiation between them to those weighing their options. Such information could facilitate meaningful comparisons between rival products within some market sector (e.g. brands of coffee) or between alternative means of accomplish a single objective (e.g. impacts of driving alone in a private automobile vs. carpooling, taking public transit, or bicycling to work), or can call into question consumption options in a non-comparative way (e.g. veal). Persons could thus assimilate this information and combine it with other information about the relative merits of alternative choices, forming and revising their specific and general preferences, while also reflecting upon or revising their considered value judgments. Informational efforts are thus linked to behavior through personal values and social norms, and while behavioral change may be the primary policy objective from of such efforts, the focus here shall be upon the normative issues that surround the interaction of information with personal values and social norms.

A core component of this interaction is the psychological need for or moral commitment to *integrity*, which requires a kind of reconciliation between one's personal values and actions. Stephen Carter casts integrity as a "pre-political" virtue "without which other political views and

values are useless" (1996, *ix*), suggesting its foundational role in normative political problems but also setting it apart from more substantive value commitments. Integrity doesn't presuppose any substantive social or political ends, but allows for their pursuit. Those exhibiting integrity in their personal or public lives avoid acting in ways that violate their deeply held views about right and wrong or fail to reflect their values, and seek a kind of reflective equilibrium between their value judgments and actions, revising both to bring them in accord with one another. As a psychological imperative, they are troubled by contradictions between their actions and beliefs, where they might not be true to themselves, and as a social one they are concerned with doing as they outwardly represent themselves as believing, appearing to others as such. Insofar as the dissemination of information about the social and environmental effects of commodity options induces changes in consumer behavior, the moral psychology at work involves integrity, in this inward private or outward public sense. Coming to know certain facts, whether that information was intentionally sought or inadvertently acquired, brings about this discomfort, with changes in one's consumer behavior as one means of reconciling the conflict between values and action.

Other means for resolving such inner conflict are also available, and can work against the aims of informational efforts. The oft-observed phenomenon of youthful idealism giving way to hardened cynicism or self-oriented materialism could be explained by the gradual revision of social and environmental values rather than consumer preferences, where persons maintain their integrity by simply narrowing the scope of their concern or amending their moral commitments based on a revised assessment of what is possible, as the opportunity costs for maintaining that idealism with integrity increase. In addition, minimal cleverness is needed to rationalize one's existing consumer behavior, convincing oneself that the gap between one's values and behavior is not as large as it is in fact, often in ways that border on self-deception but nonetheless satisfy the psychological need to avoid cognitive dissonance. By adopting a self-serving skepticism about product information or the social and environmental problems with which it is linked, or by selective attention to data based on its propensity to validate existing behavior, persons can maintain integrity while allowing wide gaps between their values and behavior by convincing themselves and/or others that those gaps are in fact small or nonexistent. The tenacity with which we sometimes rationalize our consumer behavior reveals the power that our integrity imperative exercises on us, along with illustrating one of our cognitive defenses against that imperative compromising our narrower self-interest.

Insofar as integrity is viewed as a psychological imperative, it has ethical import only through a kind of Humean sentimentalism whereby moral wrongness manifests in subjective feelings of disapprobation. But the internal dynamic in which integrity features is also linked to issues of ignorance and responsibility, which raise normative questions to be treated in the next section. If we do have some moral responsibility to seek out information concerning the social and environmental impacts of our consumer choices, to reflect on this information, and to revise our values and/or behavior accordingly—where integrity plays the pivotal role in prompting our reflection and revision upon cognitive recognition of the information in question—then we cannot cope with the demands of integrity by adopting a self-serving but deceptive skepticism or maintaining a willful ignorance. A genuine moral commitment to integrity, as opposed to having a psychological need for resolution of inner conflict, could not be maintained disingenuously or through self-deception without being self-undermining. Persons could still revise their values in light of information that showed them to contradict those values in some actions that they have other reasons for seeking to maintain, so they need not necessarily revise consumer behavior in the face of cognitively recognized information, but some popular strategies for coping with the gaps between values and actions that integrity seeks to close would be off limits, perhaps as inconsistent with integrity itself. This kind of responsibility, through which persons are made to view their actions in an interdependent global context, helps to define the notion of cosmopolitan citizenship (Dobson 2006), through which persons concern themselves with the global effects of their local actions, and has implications for informational governance to be explored below.

To illustrate the internal dynamic by which information interacts with integrity, yielding a process by which values need to be reconciled with actions and from which behavioral change is an upshot, suppose that I was morally opposed to some harmful process by which some (but not all) garments were manufactured. While this process was not prohibited by law, it was in my view reprehensible, and I could not in good conscience support it. Since alternatives that did not rely upon the process were available, if for a marginally higher cost, I saw my choice to buy the harmful product (as I shall hereafter refer to the product that was produced or brought to market through harmful processes) as endorsing the harmful processes, to which I objected. In the face of clear and credible information that a garment that I was considering for purchase had this quality, I could not follow through with the purchase without compromising my moral integrity. Absent such information, I would be free to consider purchasing the garment, and would

therefore compare it against alternatives on the basis of criteria other than the social and environmental effects of its production (most of which would likely be intrinsic to the garment itself, rather than extrinsic in the manner described above). But if confronted with information confirming the embedded harm, my consumer calculus would be altered.

One such informational approach is suggested by Keith Hyams, who notes in his defense of a system of tradable personal carbon allowances (PCAs) that it might "serve to motivate citizens to 'do their bit' in the belief that they are contributing to a larger effort to combat climate change" (2009, 238), adding a moral motive to the economic motive provided through a carbon tax. Since any implementation of PCAs would require feedback on individual carbon emissions along with some determination of individual carbon allowances, one advantage of this hybrid informational and regulatory approach lies in its mobilization of a distinctively ethical sensibility alongside an economic one. Even if the economic motive for personal decarbonization had a stronger effect upon behavior—persons could gain materially from their ability to trade excess shares and would be required to pay for any failure to remain within their prescribed allowances—the additional moral motivation could supplement that material motive for some but might also contribute additional benefits beyond any behavioral inducements. Linking personal behavior to collective impacts and responsibilities may also provide a measure of legitimacy for the regulatory aims of a PCA system, given the normative links between good and bad individual behavior and larger global injustices that it establishes, and provides a form of ecological feedback that is not present in standard carbon pricing or regulatory schemes, which typically convey little such information.

This information-obligation nexus is more clearly stated by Andrew Dobson, who takes on humanitarian conceptions of ethical cosmopolitanism, assuming that "we are more likely to feel obliged to assist others in their plight if we are responsible for their situation – if there is some identifiable causal relationship between what we do, or what we have done, and how they are" (2006, 171). His case is against humanitarian forms of obligation to distant others, wherein ability to come to the aid of those in peril forms the basis for global ethics. As he claims, "causal responsibility produces a thicker connection between people that appeals to membership in a common humanity" (172), suggestion on the basis of this psychological premise that motivation to act on behalf of distant others could be strengthened if rooted in appeals to responsibility for harming. for Dobson, information that establishes such causal links might underscore the causal

links between individual behavior and its global environmental effects. The ecological footprint, he suggests, "enables us to think of the material impact we have on the biotic (including human) and abiotic elements that lie within – or beneath – it" (176-77), which "makes 'nearness' a more palpable reality than can be produced through reflection on our common humanity" and "take us well beyond our immediate geographical location" in the manner required for fostering genuine cosmopolitan citizenship.

Before going any further, I should bracket several preliminary objections that I will not discuss any further here. Some might question my assumption of responsibility for the process in question in my role as consumer, denying that my consumption of ethically objectionable products confers or connotes any "support" for the practice in question. Any responsibility, they might argue, lies with the firm's management, which determines manufacturing processes, or with the policymakers that have allowed such products to be sold. While I don't wish to deny that other parties are indeed responsible in some way, and are perhaps more responsible than are the consumers of harmful products, for the purposes of this paper I merely suppose some kind of responsibility to links consumers with harm that occurs up the supply chain. As Iris Young argues, this kind of responsibility need not be backward-looking and blame-oriented, as with what she terms the "liability model" of responsibility, but may instead ask consumers "to reflect morally on the normal and hitherto acceptable market relationship in which they act" (2004, 378), challenging norms where necessary rather than seeking to hold specific agents responsible for harm caused by a combination of economic forces and overly permissive norms.

Second, I can cogently view myself or be viewed as supporting a harmful practice without my support being either necessary or sufficient to the continuation of that practice. That is, my reasons for boycotting ethically objectionable products need not depend upon my refusal to patronize offending firms having any effect upon their future behavior. Conversely, the fact that my individual action on its own would not make a difference in reducing the harm to which I objected should not deter my seeking to reconcile my values and actions, and no demonstration of discrete harm resulting directly and uniquely from any particular consumer choice is needed. My personal boycott can have expressive rather than instrumental value in condemning the offensive practice even if its demand signal does not register within apparel markets, and I can be responsible for harm that I cause together with many others through the combined effects of our separate actions, even if the bad outcome for which we would be responsible would not be

affected by any one of us ceasing to contribute (Parfit 1984). So long as I contribute to it though my individual consumer behavior, I see myself as supporting something to which I object, where supporting entails some kind of complicity in the harmful outcome to which I object, even if in so doing I cannot prevent it from occurring (Kutz 2000).

To be sure, several problems confound the transformative potential of information from having the transformational effects described above. Accurate information concerning the social and environmental effects of commodities whose production relies upon complex global supply chains can be hard to gather (Conca 2001), as these are typically deliberately shrouded in opacity and distant from those whose disapprobation would most threaten them, and greenwashing efforts can simultaneously frustrate data collection and undermine public confidence in its accuracy and objectivity. Absent credible and comprehensive information that can be gathered and consolidated, little benefit results from its effective dissemination. Supposing that this obstacle can be overcome and a credible and comprehensive dataset assembled, further problems with the presentation and dissemination of information arise, as overly complex data reporting can confuse or otherwise overwhelm its intended audience while oversimplified presentation can minimize its informational value and trivialize the range of impacts that some products cause by myopically focusing upon a single one. But supposing that this obstacle is likewise overcome, and good data is well and widely disseminated, a final problem is likely to face informational efforts: those exposed to this potentially transformative information may choose simply to ignore it, preferring to remain ignorant of the social and environmental effects of their consumer actions and behavior, despite the low costs of rectifying this ignorance and acting accordingly.

Excusable ignorance

In posing the question of acquiring relevant knowledge as one of *responsibility*, rather than one of moral duty or civic virtue, my intention is to bridge philosophical, political, and legal analysis. All three involve *ought* claims, but the language of responsibility has connotations that might usefully link the normative to the legal and political in a way that duty and virtue cannot. Moral responsibility is concerned with one's fitness for blame, and is often viewed as justifying assessments of remedial liability. While one can cause wrongful harm without being responsible for that harm, judgments of responsibility not only add to the moral assessment of some action (i.e. that the agent was at fault) but in some cases also justify legal and political responses that do

not automatically follow from neglect of moral duty alone. It might be morally wrong to break a promise, and fidelity to promises may be a moral virtue, for example, but outside of the violation of legal contracts the state's authority to enforce promise-keeping or to order remedies for those injured by its violation is quite limited. By contrast, if one is responsible for keeping the terms of one's promise, then such legal interventions may be warranted.

In the case of responsibility for harmful acts committed from ignorance, the distinction between moral wrongness and responsibility is crucial, as culpability and liability for harm is often thought to be defeasible by excusable ignorance, where agents are unaware of any potential for harm at the time that they engage in the harmful action and so are excused from fault for that action. Such a distinction weighs heavily in law, which further distinguishes between the kind of ignorance that is excusable and that which is not (falling into this latter category are reckless and negligent harm, which involve ignorance but also a faulty indifference to the welfare of others), and has further implications for politics. Under a fault-based liability standard, I cannot be held liable for harm that I cause through my excusable ignorance, although I would be liable under a strict liability standard. If I'm responsible for harm from some past action of mine, I could be legally required to pay some remedial compensation for it, and legal restrictions could in some cases be legitimately used to discourage my committing similar harmful actions in the future. Framing the question in terms of responsibility therefore serves to identify a subset of wrongful actions for which legal and political responses may be warranted, as well as to highlight the role played by ignorance in the assessment of such actions. Some of these might usefully be joined with some kinds of actions that informational approaches target in their implicit critique.

If excusable ignorance marks the distinction between responsibility and mere wrongness, along with the threshold beyond which legal and political interference may be justified, then the question about responsibility for knowing is one that seeks to clarify this distinction or threshold by defining excusable ignorance. As noted above, mere ignorance of the harmful effects of one's actions does not necessarily excuse them, as negligent and reckless harm illustrate. One way of expressing the moral failure in negligence or recklessness is to note that the offender was responsible for exercising some threshold of care for the welfare of others, and that their actions exhibited a willful disregard of that welfare. There was some set of empirical and moral facts that the offender did not cognitively recognize: they may have failed to recognize or internalize the risks of harm to others generated by their reckless or negligence (as in negligence), or they

may have shown a similar ignorance about the moral seriousness of those risks through an indifference toward others (as in recklessness). By stipulating that a reasonable person would have cognitively recognized these moral and empirical facts, judgments about negligence and recklessness are assessments of what we have a responsibility to know, and therefore under what circumstances our wrongful harming of others warrants *ex ante* or *post hoc* state interference. The duties of care in both are therefore epistemic responsibilities: the analytic structure of these offenses postulates a responsibility to know some set of moral and empirical facts, distinguishing between excusable and inexcusable (if sometimes mitigating) forms of ignorance.

Excusable ignorance is often thought to defeat blame and responsibility only insofar as persons are not responsible for what they don't know, which typically requires that they have no control over it. As Michael Zimmerman notes (1997), this could undermine blame for wrongful actions entirely, as nobody is fully in control of their own ignorance. Thus Zimmerman argues that "one is culpable for behaving ignorantly only if one is culpable for being ignorant" (423). One must be "cognitively connected" to outcomes for which persons can be held culpable, which requires not merely the existence of pertinent information linking one's individual actions to morally bad outcomes, but one's awareness of this information and its cognitive assimilation if not necessarily its incorporation into values or behavior. For Zimmerman, culpability for harm is thus quite rare and difficult to establish, for it requires a culpable neglect to disabuse oneself of ignorance with the knowledge that such complacent ignorance might lead to wrongful harm. One must foresee that one's contingent ignorance could result in some wrongful harm, opting to maintain that ignorance in the face of countervailing precautionary duties, in order to be culpably ignorant about those facts, and thus culpable for actions that result from such ignorance.

But what if the ability to foresee the harm in question depended upon being disabused of the same ignorance? What if (for example) the same cloud of ignorance about climate change simultaneously made me ignorant about its harmful effects upon others *and* my potential role in contributing to it? I could not in this case, according to Zimmerman's analysis, be culpable for my harmful acts committed from ignorance about their causal role in climate-related harm, since I would lack any cognitive connection to such harm. Nor would I be culpable for my ignorance itself, since I would lack any basis for anticipating harm to result from it. In such cases, willful ignorance would seem to be able to excuse any harmful actions of mine, as one kind of ignorance fortifies another against blame, and it is only through being involuntarily disabused of ignorance

that I could ever become culpable for my future harmful actions. Positing a responsibility to know would require that reasonable efforts be made to acquire and cognitively recognize facts relevant to one's behavior, defeating the temptations toward willful ignorance described above. While this does not yet justify such a responsibility, note for now that it could address problems related to an overly expansive view of excusable ignorance.

In addition to ignorance about causal facts, ignorance of moral precepts is also taken to excuse some instances of wrongful harm. Gideon Rosen asks whether Smith, a "run of the mill American sexist circa (say) 1952" might be blamed for the "moral ignorance" that leads him to treat his daughters in a way that is, unbeknownst to him, "unfair and therefore wrong" (2003, 66). As a "complacent sexist," the basis of Smith's differential treatment of his male and female offspring is simply "an undefended axiom of common sense" (67). While Smith might be blamed were he actually complacent about his beliefs, Rosen supposes that he is aware of and critically reflects upon opposing views concerning gender equality, but these fail to "dislodge his own sense of what is evidently correct." Smith's ignorance cannot be faulted unless "arguments against his view were readily available and manifestly compelling" (which is "unlikely"), Rosen suggests, and he cannot be blamed for failing "to see through a pervasive and well-protected ideology." Smith would in this case be wrong but blameless for his sexist acts, Rosen argues, as the moral ignorance from which he acted would have been a sign of "ordinariness" rather than "culpable negligence or recklessness" (67-8). While Rosen notes that it would be "unseemly" for Smith to "do anything but 'accept responsibility' for his behavior" (68) when later disabused of his sexism, his excusable ignorance would defeat any responsibility for his actions while morally ignorant, and his proper response to his later awareness of the moral facts would be one of "agent regret" rather than "guilt or self-reproach," which imply culpable ignorance, and others could not "hold the bad consequence against him in the manner characteristic of blame" (68).

Excusable moral ignorance of this kind would seem to challenge any responsibility to know, since contemporary consumerists norms resemble those 1950s gender norms in Rosen's example, with few ascertaining any reason to regard their own consumption patterns as morally problematic. In Rosen's example, Smith knowingly engages in differential treatment of his sons and daughters, but is ignorant of the wrongness in doing so. This form of ignorance—about moral facts, or precepts of justice—is rooted in unjust social norms that Smith cannot reasonably be expected to transcend, according to Rosen, given how pervasive and entrenched they were in

Smith's time. While this kind of ignorance cannot *justify* his actions, which are still wrong, it can justify the withholding of externally-imposed blame. Smith may later blame himself for his sexist actions (or for the sexism itself), and may *take* responsibility for his wrongful past actions by seeking to rectify them later on, but the kind of ignorance involved here concerns a standard of fairness which in Smith's time would hardly have existed as a public norm, according to Rosen, much less one that others could tenably blame Smith for not rejecting. Smith and others around him lived in a sexist society in which defensible norms of gender equality and equal treatment were not yet widely held, while sexist beliefs and behavior were reinforced by widely held public norms. While Smith would deserve commendation for transcending and challenging such norms, had he done so, Rosen denies that he should be blamed for failing to do what nearly all of his fellows likewise failed in recognizing. His moral ignorance was not his alone, but was part and parcel of the society in which he lived. Any blame for the sexism that it embraced would be collective, not assigned to its members individually.

While this kind of moral ignorance can turn in part on ignorance about facts—as Kwame Appiah argues (1993), racist norms typically depend upon empirical racialist claims—the kind of ignorance that might potentially be rectified by the informational governance approaches under consideration here is fundamentally different, as it primarily concerns facts rather than moral principles. Persons may be ignorant about the causal links between their actions and harmful effects that manifest in the world, but this is a factual rather than a moral ignorance, and one that cannot excuse wrongful harm when disabusing facts are readily available, as they were not for the sexism in Rosen's example. Apart from an insular nationalism from which some derive a xenophobia by which harm to distant others has no moral weight at all, the kind of ignorance that informational approaches take as driving global problems is one of facts about the causation and existence of harm, to which those most receptive to such approaches already object. If those now inadvertently contributing to wrongful harm through their consumption patterns were to be excused from blame and responsibility for it, this would come from a judgment that they could not reasonably have anticipated that harm to result from their actions, and had not cognitively recognized those causal connections that informational approaches seek to draw, not that they believed on the basis of mistaken moral facts that causing such harm was morally permissible.

If persons cannot be blamed for wrongful actions committed from excusable ignorance, then ignorance itself is responsible for the harm that results from them. Those in a position to

correct mistakes of fact that lead others to commit wrongful harm may be obligated to do their part in challenging prevailing social norms, and others may be similarly responsible for critically reflecting upon the mix of value judgments and empirical claims that comprise social norms. As Iris Young writes of the political responsibility that she views as necessary for challenging structural injustices of the kind that support sweatshop labor, rectification of harm rooted in political economic structures and embedded in public norms often "involves joining with others in public discourse where we try to persuade one another about sources of collective action that will contribute to ameliorating the problem" (2004, 380). Informational approaches might offer an important first step is combatting pervasive ignorance about sweatshop labor, and assist persons in withdrawing their support of such conditions by boycotting products identifies as originating under them, but as Young argues the objective of such efforts need not be limited to individual conscious-raising and consumer action. Collective and political action beyond consumer boycotts may be needed to challenge the norms and structures that support and enable sweatshop labor, preventing mere ignorance from contributing to the problem in the future.

Excusable ignorance may operate on a collective level as well as an individual one, as has been argued about its role in allowing for the greenhouse emissions that cause climate change. In the context of international policy efforts to assign national responsibility for climate change mitigation and adaptation, one contentious question that arises concerns the date at which nations began to be liable for their contribution to climate-related harm. In treaty negotiations, India has maintained an "historical responsibility" or "carbon debt" position that asserts responsibility for national emissions going back to early industrialization, which I have criticized for failing to account for excusable ignorance (Vanderheiden 2008). In defending a fault-based standard of national liability for climate related harm, I argue for assignments of remedial liability based on post-1990 (the year in which the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change assessment report was published) emissions on the basis of such an analysis. Others have taken somewhat different approaches while recognizing the role of excusable ignorance. Derek Bell (2011), for example, defends an approach based in limited liability for each nation's full historical record of emissions, on grounds that pre-1990 emissions are now equally harmful but that reasonable ignorance about the effects of climate change partly excused states from not doing more before that time to reduce them (whereas post-1990 emissions are not excusable from ignorance).

Responsibilities to know might therefore extend to collective entities like states as well as individuals. IPCC assessment reports are written for policymakers, and can be viewed (even if this was not an intention of authorizing states) as informational efforts to inform policymakers about climate change so that their further inaction could no longer be excused from ignorance of its causes and effects. NGO efforts to collect and disseminate national carbon footprints, which reveal wide disparities in per capita national contributions to climate change among states at similar levels of development, are frequently intended to shame particularly bad actors into taking stronger action to reduce their contribution, just as some product-based informational efforts try to simultaneously shame and inform individual consumers (e.g. PETA anti-fur campaigns that seek to inform about conditions under which fur is harvested as well as shame those continuing to wear it, both as a strategy for challenging the norm that fur is a benign and/or glamorous material). Watershed points that clearly mark the arrival of authoritative and widely disseminated information that make further ignorance inexcusable, like the 1990 IPCC report, are rare, and most informational efforts take years to make any significant epistemic impact. But policy debates about how to account for historical emissions in assessing national climate change liability nonetheless illustrate the policy implications of a responsibility to know. Ignoring readily available information about causal connections between national policies and global problems might connote a kind of factual ignorance, and may even be based in one, but cannot evade the remedial responsibilities that such information connotes.

Does my earlier-stipulated commitment to moral integrity leads me to seek out this kind of information, as a responsibility to know suggests, or may I minimize my internal conflicts by avoiding my exposure to ignorance-abating information (that is, pursue a self-serving strategy of *willful ignorance*)? Indeed, the *homo economicus* that controls the selfish part of my brain is well aware of the economic irrationality of several key components to leading a morally virtuous life. Insofar as we adopt moral beliefs that require us to boycott ethically objectionable products and practices, we pay a conscience tax for the higher prices or other costs that we will incur in seeking out benign alternatives to the commodities that we place off limits to ourselves. Many persons—perhaps the most economically rational among us—avoid the cultivation of a costly conscience for just this reason. But if we are plagued by such a conscience, we can nevertheless evade the taxes associated with it so long as we remain blissfully ignorant of the economic world around us, refusing to identify the morally problematic decisions that we were about to make in

time to avoid them. We might view our moral integrity as wholly reactive: certain decisions are foreclosed to us if and when we receive certain kinds of information, to which we are then forced to react through the process of reflection and revision described above, but we need not seek out that information. Like a jury, we might construe our consumer roles as requiring us to judge on the basis of information that is brought to our attention, but not to seek it out on our own.

Certainly, humans are generally disinclined to seek out such information. Many of us, to paraphrase Peirce, cling with tenacity to those beliefs that best fit with our views of the world and of ourselves, often in the face of what should be reasonable suspicions about their accuracy. We rationalize our past actions and justify our future ones by stubbornly refusing to consider that they may contradict our core value commitments. These are, I think, basic facts about human nature: that many (though not all) of us are uncomfortable with the cognitive dissonance that results from conflicts between our normative and empirical beliefs. Regardless of how well-founded our normative beliefs are at the time that we form them, once formed we are reluctant to revisit them, which we may be forced to do if we admit contrary facts into our cognitive field. But tendencies latent in human nature cannot be self-justifying, and we need further reasons than the desire to simultaneously avoid cognitive discomfort and the costs associated with being a good cosmopolitan citizen.

Insofar as we eschew a commit to inquiry into our interdependence in the world, what may begin as our considered convictions over time become to us what Mill terms dead dogma, held by momentum rather than based upon the impartial weighing of facts relevant to the projects around which we form our identity. And it is of course Mill that offers the strongest case for accepting a responsibility to know, from his passionate case for freedom of conscience in *On Liberty*. I should not cling with tenacity to my unexamined prejudices, refusing to square my unreflective preferences with readily available facts about how they interact with the world. I should instead be open to any and all information that might bring to light contradictions between facts and my values, or between my values and actions. As Mill argues, even if from a single perspective that opposes the reports of everyone else in society, and even if it turns out to be false. I should openly welcome (but critically examine) information that is relevant to my values, projects, and action, for to do otherwise is to fix in place merely contingent beliefs, foreclosing even the possibility for moral progress, making us easy prey for the factual and moral ignorance that might later cause us agent regret for which we can never adequately atone.

Implications

What, then, might we conclude about the relationship between information and civic responsibility (or environmental citizenship)? Societies with deeply entrenched ideologies of racism or sexism constitute moral failures, and are unjust. The actions that follow from racist or sexist beliefs are wrong, but the racist or sexist persons holding the racist beliefs and committing the offensive acts may not necessarily be blamed for the actions or their supporting beliefs, as these are rooted in social norms for which society may be collectively responsible. This at least follows from the analyses of Rosen and Zimmerman, and should not be as troubling a conclusion as it sounds. Blame and culpability are not the only available forms of responsibility for responding to such moral failure, and excusing individual ignorance among racist or sexist members does not necessarily excuse the collective for its perpetuation of racism and sexism. The crux lies in the recognition of the wrongness or injustice of public norms, which allows for immanent critique of the society's prevailing norms. While others in society may remain morally ignorant of the wrongness of prevailing norms, and thus not culpable for them, they would be culpable for silencing critique, for reasons aptly identified by Mill. At this point, others have a responsibility to listen to and reflect upon (but not necessarily to accept) such criticism, learning from it where appropriate. At some point, after having repeatedly heard from or on behalf of those wrongfully harmed by the prevailing sexism or racism, and having entertained and rejected the potential factual bases for such norms, norms would begin to change, and any further moral ignorance would not be excusable, and subsequent racist or sexist acts would be culpable, even if committed by the morally and/or factually ignorant.

In the meantime, those undergoing a transformation in their own personal values and beliefs as the result of such immanent critique should experience agent regret, and would have cause to atone for their past wrongful actions, perhaps by assisting in the same transformation in others but at least in ceasing to support those prevailing norms that they now reject. Ignorance begets ignorance, whether of facts or values, but becomes increasingly difficult to maintain in the face of its opposite. Transparency of information, as is frequently quipped, offers a disinfectant against the perils of ignorance. Certainly, ignorance of both kinds can be reinforced by those whose material interests depend upon its maintenance throughout society, but those keeping others ignorant for their own self-interested reasons rather than from their own ignorance would

do so culpably, and societies as a result should look to commitments to open discussion in order to decrease the potential for such prolonged error.

To the extent that societies are responsible for the welfare of their members, they have a responsibility to avoid both factual and moral errors that might adversely affect those members, which in turns entails a commitment not merely to the passive receiving of facts and judgments but also to the active maintenance of a political culture that allows for the contestation of both empirical and normative claims, especially when these serve as the bases for that society's opportunity structure. While it would be nonsensical to stipulate that members have any responsibility to know that which is currently unknown to all, but it would not be to say that they have some responsibility to avoid willful ignorance, which prevents their recognition of facts and values that are readily available. This generates at least a limited responsibility to know, to the extent that persons are culpable for some levels of ignorance that they should be able to avoid, and for which they are therefore culpable in continuing to avoid. While being among the early critics of some prevailing norms may be supererogatory rather than the kind of duty that persons can be culpable for failing to undertake, at some point this assessment flips. And it is this point that is relevant to informational governance.

Recall that informational governance involves harnessing the power of information in order to *govern*, or to dispose persons to act in accordance with identified public goals. While it is one thing to seek to alter behavior through the positive and negative incentives of standard regulatory tools, which themselves depend upon the acquisition, processing, and (in some cases) dissemination of information, it is quite another to seek behavioral change from information alone, absent any change in incentive structures other than the cognitive acceptance of some previously unrecognized facts as true and those resulting from the greater transparency of our own as well as others' actions. Information can here be used as a tool of governance on its own, as disclosure and transparency efforts are able to achieve limited behavioral change and in so doing marginally affect the realization of related social objectives, it can be instrumental to regulatory efforts that complement informational ones, and it can help to galvanize support for both through the critique and revision of social norms. One must be careful not to overstate its potential; suffice only to note that this ought to be considered as within the toolkit available for pursuing important social and environmental objectives, and is compatible with other such tools.

Now recall that some kinds of factual information can also contribute valuable normative critique, first by calling into question entrenched public norms and then by leading others to reject pernicious norms and replace them with more defensible ones. These could include data on greenhouse gas emissions by region, or energy source, or mode of transport, or on embedded water in alternative food products, or certifying the sustainability of timber or fish harvesting techniques. Where aggregate consumption patterns are placing stress on environmental or social systems, information about these stresses and available but less damaging alternatives could be used to bring about valuable social change. Where public norms permissive of overconsumption now stand as a key obstacle to a reformed consumerism that is more closely compatible with ideals of justice and sustainability, informational approaches that have as their proximate goal the reform of individual consumer behavior can have the salutary long-term effect of bringing about normative progress. Social commitments to disclosure and transparency, both in public policy and through civil society, can promote and enhance the core imperatives of governance, which involve coordinating the actions of each in the long-term best interests of all.

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