2.2 Responsibility

Everywhere on advertising posters and shopping bags, one is asked today to take responsibility for the climate, to choose the climate-friendly product and consume in a climate-friendly way. Referring to the broader subject of sustainability[1], Buschmann and Sulmowski state that "responsibility plays a central role for sustainability discourses" (2011, p. 283). Declarations and calls to action from the German federal government in relation to climate change responsibilise the public in questionable ways. For example, in 2019, German agricultural minister Julia Klöckner introduced a campaign at schools asking students to consider farming's climate impact. In a press release[2], Klöckner stated: "Only together we will manage to arrest climate change – here, agriculture is a solution bringer. But also each and every single one can have an impact. And this is the case because be it vegetables, fruit or meat – *we* decide what lands on the plate and thus on the field. [This campaign] wants to motivate children and adolescents to discover and conquer the scope of influence of agriculture and also of one's own consumption for more climate action" (BMEL, 2019, orig. emph.). This puts the lion's share of climate responsibility not only onto individual consumers but specifically children (of all people). Such responsibilisation of the public is also accentuated by the role the topic of climate action plays in the run-up to elections and other political contestations. This omnipresent call to climate action, framed through the angle of responsibility, is amongst what Ludger Heidbrink refers to when he speaks of a boom the concept of responsibility has experienced in recent decades. For Heidbrink, who has occupied himself extensively with the concept, responsibility in its traditional sense is characterised as follows:

> Paramount is determining who is responsible for whom (or what) according to which criteria (or who can be attributed such a responsibility).
>
> Heidbrink, 2003, p. 21f.

Other definitions of the concept echo this multidimensionality, indicating that responsibility is never absolute but always dependent: someone is being held responsible by somebody else according to some form of regulation or authority. In referring

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1   Relevant citations that refer to the broader subject of sustainability are included in this thesis because climate action is seen as an integral part of sustainability efforts.

2   By the German agricultural ministry: https://www.bmel.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen /DE/2019/225-echt-kuh-l.html, (accessed 17/09/2022); the name 'Echt kuh-l!' is a wordplay on the words 'cool' and 'cow'; the German word 'Kuh' [spoken *ku*] means 'cow'.

to a particular 'authority of responsibility', Heidbrink also points towards responsibility attribution being situational and context-specific. The philosopher Hans Lenk defines the concept similarly:

> To be responsible, or to take responsibility for something (or someone), means that somebody is obliged to (against) an addressee for actions, results of actions, tasks and states of affairs, and that he or she has to justify these actions and results before (or in the face of) a judgement, according to standards, criteria, or norms.

Lenk, 2006, p. 2/5

Accordingly, Heidbrink proposes to distinguish further between different forms of responsibility, "be it the event related causal responsibility, the social role- or function related responsibility, the ability related competence responsibility and the legal responsibility in the sense of liability" (2003, p. 7). Yet this, in turn, brings its own problematic as "these differentiations quickly reach a point where they produce more ambiguities than clarities" (ibid.).

Despite this limitation, Heidbrink nevertheless attributes significant conceptual value to the notion of responsibility, as it goes beyond linear and unequivocal moral concepts and even withstands incalculable, uncertain and surprising events: "Since it is not based upon categorical but hypothetical imperatives, it is particularly suited to be applied in **normative grey areas** and to prove itself amongst the turbulences of complex contexts" (2003, p. 19, my emph.). Clearly, the challenge posed to humanity by climate change is one of the factors that bestow this point in human history with an extent of complexity that is unprecedented: "Climate change is unlike any other environmental problem, really unlike any other public policy problem. It's almost uniquely global, uniquely long-term, uniquely irreversible and uniquely uncertain – certainly unique in the combination of all four" (Wagner and Weitzman, 2015, p. 8).

More traditional conceptions of responsibility that stress linearity and causality have been increasingly challenged, since this logic that is based upon "(causality, blame, knowledge) [...] is limited and limiting in the context of contemporary hazards like climate change" (Adam and Groves, 2007, cited in Butler, 2010, p. 176). Therefore, climate change represents one of these contemporary grey areas in which responsibility can unfold its full conceptual potential. However, there is a host of further complicating factors at play, for example that a national focus remains inadequate, because the atmosphere is unbothered by country borders. Yet, the true crux lies in aspects related to societal treatment of climate change:

> The success of the responsibility principle embodies a direct reaction to the increase in complexity in the modern world. Its task lies in providing adequate crite-

ria for assessing dynamic processes increasingly acquiring a momentum of their own […] which guarantee the integration of social action even where insecurity and uncertainty dominate.

<div align="right">Heidbrink, 2003, p. 19</div>

This resonates with what the influential philosopher Hans Jonas noted in his 1979 magnum opus *The responsibility principle*[3], in which he almost prophetically characterised current social realities. Whilst he proclaims that:

the old prescriptions of the 'neighbour' ethics – of justice, charity, honesty, and so on – still hold in their intimate immediacy for the nearest, day-by-day sphere of human interaction, this sphere is [however] overshadowed by a growing realm of collective action where doer, deed, and effect are no longer the same as they were in the proximate sphere, and which by the enormity of its powers forces upon ethics a **new dimension of responsibility never dreamed of before**.

<div align="right">Jonas, 1985, p. 6, my emph.</div>

When thinking about responsibility, one obviously enters the realm of morality. This fact alone accentuates the concept's relational and social nature, as it does not make sense to conceive of either, responsibility or morality, as distinct from human interaction: "What makes moral thinking moral thinking is the function that it plays in society" (Greene, 2016). As mentioned, one is not endowed with certain amounts of responsibility by nature, instead responsibility is negotiated and attributed socially (cf. Grunwald, 1999, cited in Grunwald, 2018, p. 423). Two conclusions can thus be drawn so far: first, responsibility as a concept is itself deeply complex and at the same time equipped to deal with profound complexity, at least to an extent. It is deeply dependent, thus multidimensional, however there comes a point where further differentiations and specifications do more harm than good – they cause more confusion than they manage to lift – a classical Kuznets curve. Secondly, its multidimensionality renders the notion of responsibility an idea uniquely equipped to be applied in the social, relational and collective realm.

Cumulative responsibility

Lenk points towards responsibility attributions becoming even more complicated in situations characterised by cumulative responsibility. He refers to the dying forests,

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3   English version: 1985.

but his words seem almost better suited for the attribution of responsibility in relation to the climate crisis:

> Here, many different little harms well below a threshold accumulate to create a total damage which as such cannot be accounted to each individual. Thus there is a problem of the attribution of responsibility here. Everybody who takes part (e.g., runs a car or uses coal or oil heating systems) contributes, but any individual contribution is not as such already really harmful. To whom can we attribute responsibility for the total damage?

Lenk, 2006, p. 3/5

Jonas also points to the challenge ethics faces today, that it has to be able to deal with such cumulative consequences of action because of the explosive proliferation of technology:

> The cumulative self-propagation of the technological change of the world constantly overtakes the conditions of its contributing acts and moves through none but unprecedented situations, for which the lessons of experience are powerless. […] All this would have to be co-intended in the will of the single action if this is to be a morally responsible one.

Jonas, 1985, p. 7

Attributing responsibility in situations distinguished by cumulative harm or collective action thus presents particularly puzzling challenges: a characteristic obstacle in such situations (in the economic sense) lies in the occurrence of collective decision dilemmas like free-rider dynamics or the so-called "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin, 1968). Therefore, these are also typical for climate change (climate as commons): "The earth's climate system offers a rare example of a pure public good" (Vanderheiden, 2016, p. 2). In economic theories this is conceived of as follows: "[…] *free riding* refers to the absence of contribution towards the provision of a public good by an individual, even though he or she will not be excluded from benefiting from that good" (Marwell and Ames, 1981). Here, Heidbrink stresses "how difficult it is to impinge upon economic processes with moral standards or to trace back collective damage progressions to unequivocally identifiable causes and originators" (2003, p. 17). The concept of free riding rests upon the logic "that under such conditions it is irrational for an individual to voluntarily contribute" (Marwell and Ames, 1981, p. 296). This situation characterises climate change, where agents often claim a disproportionate portion of common goods for themselves whilst not contributing accordingly (and sometimes not at all) to the maintenance of the goods – one only has to

think of the recent *Dieselgate* scandal caused by German automotive managers. This illustrates that the rationality paradigm is obsolete (a point that will be returned to below), because especially in relation to climate change this attitude leads directly into the abyss: if everybody thinks only of himself, then it is absolutely not taken care of everyone. Also, in matters that are not illegal (as the manipulation of motor vehicles was, of course), an agent weighs the comparatively large effort to (voluntarily) adapt their life to climate action vis-à-vis the crushingly small value they will incur through their contribution. Therefore, the incentive to free ride is not only particularly large, it is also rational in the strict economic sense. Stephen Gardiner (2001) further writes that the free rider mechanism becomes exacerbated with climate change being an intergenerational issue: as humans, we are wired to seek instant gratification: "With intertemporal public goods like climatic stability, free riding becomes especially tempting, as cooperation costs are borne immediately but its benefits primarily accrue in the future" (cited in Vanderheiden, 2016, p. 3). Mike Hulme (2009/10) also points to this psychological phenomenon and argues that one solution may be to shift the focus towards the local, where improvements can be grasped more directly. Once again the inadequacy of theories built on rationality, self-interest and individualism arises because if everybody free rides (which would be 'rational'), then the world will end sooner or later together with these theories.

Critique of the responsibilisation of the individual

Against this backdrop, Heidbrink ultimately voices a deep ambivalence towards the notion of responsibility in his book *A critique of responsibility*. Besides recognising its conceptual value, especially in complex situations (as discussed), he nevertheless takes considerable issue with it: he finds it to be substantially overused, in particular with regard to the increasing autonomy and personal responsibility that is expected from single citizen consumers: "All the more urgently it has to be determined which individual burdens are caused by the dominance of personal responsibility and where the limits of impertinence – and this also always refers to social fairness – lie" (Heidbrink and Hirsch, 2006, p. 14).

Famous philosopher Sigmund Bauman thus demands a new form of ethics that has at its core a "*moral responsibility* which (re)enables citizens to manage **common** affairs" (Bauman, 1995, p. 284, my emph.). This badly needed new ethics is however acutely incompatible with omnipresent calls for autonomy and individual responsibility "observed as a characteristic of contemporary politics" (Butler, 2010, p. 176). In this context, Heidbrink foresees that in this century, industrial societies will "develop into comprehensive responsibility societies" (2006, p. 13) with a continuously increasing share of aspects and tasks becoming attributed to personal responsibility (ibid.). Often this results in paralysing overstrain of individual citizens, not least because practical skills and competencies conducive to climate action (e.g., sewing, re-

pairing, preparing food with seasonal and regional ingredients) have become ousted by economic rationales like progress and efficiency.

What is of special interest to this study is this particular tension between individual and collective responsibility. When turning to the literature on responsibility and climate action, it becomes immediately apparent that the single consumer, or in the words of Elisabeth Shove, "the individual CO_2 addict" (2010, p. 1280), is given excessive attention. However, this "prevailing fixation on individual behaviour within mainstream policy and some areas of research tends to decontextualize consumption, dislocating its effects from its drivers and constraints and ignoring the wealth of innovative collaborative, citizen and entrepreneurial activity emerging internationally" (Rau et al., 2014, p. 193). Nico Lüdtke defines *responsibilisation*, as "the process in which power structures influence processes of self-discovery, thereby transferring the responsibility to the citizenry that actually belongs to the state" (2018, p. 113). Thus, the current focus on individual responsibility deflects away from collective responsibility that can only be initiated by elected political representatives in democratic systems. In this respect, Bauman and Beck speak of institutions "for overcoming problems [that] are transformed into institutions for causing problems; [that] you are, on the one hand, made responsible for yourself, but on the other hand are dependent on conditions which completely elude your grasp (and in most cases your knowledge)" (Beck, 1992/1998, cited in Bauman, 2001, p. 5, cited in Butler, 2010, p. 175).

Moving beyond conceptual and methodological individualism

According to Buschmann and Sulmowski, the consumer is imagined as autonomously choosing between clearly selectable options "in the sense of an imagined average standard person held together by some fictional unity" (2018, p. 290). In their eyes, this springs from the dominant neoliberal paradigm characterising our system: a prime component of this is "the therein contained relocation of the focus of responsibility onto the individual and the concomitant incentive to adopt individual responsibility" that are to be understood as "a symptom of the programme of the withdrawal of the state" (Krasmann, 2003, p. 183, cited in Buschmann and Sulmowski, 2018, p. 286).

Armin Grunwald conceptualises that the individual actually holds two types of responsibility: "We carry this responsibility as individual people on two different shoulders so to speak" (2018, p. 432). On the one hand, there is an individual responsibility that stems from an acutely overrated consumer power and on the other hand a rather collective responsibility as member of the citizenry to take part in political processes and make one's voice heard. Rau et al. write that therefore, "individual citizen consumers alone cannot, and should not, be expected to shoulder the material and social burdens of a transition towards greater sustainability" (2014, p. 203).

Ulrich Beck also criticises that, in combination with neoliberalism, the individual is made to become their own *moral entrepreneur*, supposedly holding the entirety of humanity's fate in their hands. From this, there results a new *categorical imperative* that demands: behave as if the survival of the world depended on your actions! Eat less meat, forego flights, switch to green energy! "The key contradiction here is that the individual is condemned to individualisation and self-responsibility, even vis-à-vis global threats, despite the fact that he is severed from the decision contexts which escape his influence" (2009, p. 170). Buschmann and Sulmowski also believe that "the boom of responsibility attributions in relation to sustainability can be understood as *mode of governing* of neoliberally organised societies. Practices that once were born out of an emancipatory impetus, today contribute to an individualisation of structurally conditioned problems" (2018, p. 291). Thomas Alkemeyer similarly notes an *inner conflict* that surfaces when the current situation is examined from both sides: on the one hand we accept a political situation, "that passes on the public and legal responsibility *of society* for the citizenry onto the subjects themselves" (2018, p. 417), yet at the same time this state of affairs also mirrors "*the basic promise of modernity*, to lead an autonomous and self-determined life" (Rosa, 2007, p. 17, cited in ibid.). Several scholars thus deem this individualisation of responsibility with respect to climate action inadequate, not least because this allows politics to escape its responsibility and delegate this disproportionately to the citizenry: "There must be binding rules for sustainability instead of a paternalistic influencing of private consumption" (Grunwald, 2018, p. 433). This influencing includes what has come to be understood as *nudging*.

Critique of nudging

Nudging refers to nonbinding and sanction-free (as opposed to prohibiting or monetarily incentivising) steering of current behavioural patterns in favour of desired alternative behaviour (see e.g., behavioural economists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, 2008). "Consumers are to be merely gently *nudged* in the desired direction" (Paech, 2018, p. 442). While in recent years some proponents of nudging theory (e.g., Stern, 2020) have conceded that this view of human behaviour is inadequate as it is limited by "multiple contextual factors" (p. 2), this does in no way go far enough, as here, the individual is still thought to be merely surrounded by social context, demoting the social environment to at best playing second fiddle. In the few cases where contextual factors are deemed central, the relationship is conceived of as ingenuously one-way with these external and largely stable social, historical, political and cultural circumstances only bearing upon and affecting the individual (cf. Burke et al., 2009, p. 56S). However, the social environment is not to be thought of as simply being "a fixed entity that inevitably impinges upon individuals" (Bandura, 1994, p. 49) – instead, the influence needs to be perceived of as critically bidirectional, in-

tegral and dynamic. A more holistic perspective is desperately needed that takes seriously the multidirectional, co-constitutive, constantly-in-formation and often not cognitively processed relationship between individual and social context (cf. Burke et al., 2009). This relationship is expressed in daily practices that therefore encompass the appropriate focus of investigation. Considering these "social rules that govern etiquette and morality [which] comprise examples of [such] naturalised predispositions" (ibid.) allows for making visible the omnipresent and counterproductive over-responsibilisation of the individual citizen.

Denial of political responsibility for climate action

It is thus necessary to shed the current focus on individual behaviour, including the widespread accusation of eco-hypocrisy and "to be explicit about the extent to which state and other actors configure the fabric and the texture of daily life" (Shove, 2010, p. 1281).

In the eyes of Beck, contemporary political systems are partially characterised by governing through a risk discourse that allows the normalisation of threats that the reigning growth-oriented system necessarily brings with it (cited in Butler, 2010, p. 171). Beck terms this for late capitalist governments typical situation "organised irresponsibility" (Beck, 1995; 1997). In the face of currently swelling ecological dangers, Catherine Butler finds these risk discourses to proliferate in the current political present as they "involv[e] attributions of causes, blame, and accountability [which] could be seen to more closely resemble part of the processes of organised irresponsibility as it guarantees precisely the non-attributability of systemic hazards (2010, p. 188f.). This had the paradoxical consequence that climate action efforts in the global North have led to more environmental destruction in the global South: "As so often in the past, we see how scientific and technical ingenuity are being integrated into patterns of global inequality" (Guha, 2000, cited in Jamison, p. 20). Continued liberalisation of global markets is not actually causing more liberty, by contrast: it threatens to destroy the basis of human existence, because risks, for example those caused by climate change, do not feature in these discourses that rest upon freedom, free markets and free individuals. "Beck's concept of organised irresponsibility focuses upon the discrepancy between contemporary knowledges of causes of harm and the continuation of the very systems of action which create them" (Butler, 2010, p. 174). In many ways political realities steer people into directions that oppose climate action – a fact that by itself proves the inadequacy of individual responsibility attributions. Besides, "when market dynamics come to be seen as the most suitable path towards a better future, democracy and the opportunities for meaningful civic participation become eroded" (Dahlgren, 2012, p. 3).

To mobilise consumers for climate action, political structures need to reflect these intentions. Instead, politics is denying its responsibility by sending mixed messages:

> Examples of the perverse effect of dominant structures are legion: private transport is incentivized over public transport; motorists are prioritised over pedestrians; energy supply is subsidised and protected, while demand management is often chaotic and expensive; waste disposal is cheap, economically and behaviourally.

Jackson, 2009, p. 151

Many climate-relevant political decisions still unfold in a way that is far from responsible and consistent (cf. Nerlich et al., 2010, p. 7). "Such contradictions can result in a loss of trust in government and a form of denial of personal responsibility for [...] environmental impacts [...]" (Kroesen, 2013, Hares et al., 2010, cited in Westlake, 2017, p. 10). The default argument here is that the voter would not accept political decisions that prohibit certain taken-for-granted liberties: "Of course then it is no wonder that Uncle Sam[4] himself not only protects at all costs the worst climate killers from any form of taxation, but also subsidises unprofitable airports if need be" (Paech, 2012, p. 22). We find ourselves in the absurd situation where it is against our own interest to act in a climate-friendly manner, either because we have to give up things we want or because we have to pay a premium.

Butler reports that in her group discussions, a clear discrepancy emerged in the responses of the participants between "the characterisation of climate change as a collective, interconnected, pervasive and societally endemic problem and the political description of a (non)society comprised of free individuals that can act upon climate change through their individualised self-responsible choices" (2010, p. 189). This indicates that "governance for prosperity must engage actively with citizens both in establishing the mandate and delivering the change" (Jackson, 2009, p. 168). Politics should thus also question its perception of citizens and begin to see them as part of a society that is capable of voicing an interest for more than oneself: "There often exists an implicit model of the audience which may not be subject to empirical scrutiny and which may assume from the outset a degree of ignorance or deficit which is itself not a good perspective from which to begin dialogue" (Nerlich et al., 2010, p. 11). Perhaps there is not only a lack of trust in politics amongst the citizenry. In turn, government also displays a lack of faith that voters are willing to favour courses of action conducive to the common good. Julian Nida-Rümelin says in this respect: "It appears strange that the theory of human motivation that is dominant

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4   Original in German: *Vater Staat.*

today considers the exception of the amoralist as being the rule" (2011, p. 37). There-fore, an interpretation that sees responsibility of the individual as a mature citizen in a collective setting and not only as a remote-controlled consumer is urgently needed.

Bauman thus attributes an agency gap to the policies of contemporary indus-trial societies caused by this political responsibility vacuum (Bauman, 2001, p. 188, cited in Butler, 2010, p. 188): "Paradoxically, research suggests that people see gov-ernments as responsible for addressing environmental problems, yet have little faith that they will" (Nerlich et al., 2010, p. 7). James Blake views this similarly: "The irony is, of course, that although governmental institutions are trusted least, they are seen as most responsible for causing, and therefore solving, environmental problems" (1999, p. 268). A paradoxical divergence thus exists between the potential or power or *efficacy* of the state over climate-related outcomes and the amount of responsibility it is willing to employ. This stands in sharp contrast to the disproportionate over-responsibilisation of individuals. We are hence confronted with a decoupling of re-sponsibility and efficacy because in relation to climate change, the causes are por-trayed as endemic whilst the suggested solutions are framed as individual actions that require clear choices between different options (cf. Butler, 2010). The efficacy political and also corporate decision-makers actually hold strongly contradicts their concomitant portrayal as being too profit-driven to act responsibly. **Thus what is of particular interest to this study is this profound discrepancy between the level of responsibility that is being ascribed to societal actors and the actual true power, influence or *efficacy* they hold over the outcome.**

The discrepancy between responsibility and efficacy

Thus, I hold that individual responsibility is overemphasised because firstly, this overstrains the consumer, secondly, it affords a deflection away from the responsi-bility of politics and thirdly, the inconsistent political status quo prevents consumers from acting consistently in a climate-friendly manner. Even more persuasive from a climate perspective is that the difference the individual is able to make is actually no more than negligible:

> As Cambridge physics professor David MacKay claims: obsessively switching off the phone-charger is like bailing the Titanic with a teaspoon. Do switch it off, but please be aware how tiny a gesture it is. All the energy saved in switching off your charger for one day is used up in one second of car-driving.

> Nerlich et al., 2010, p. 7

This is deeply problematic because not only "has this focus on the individual so far obviously not led to more sustainability" (Henkel and Lindemann, 2018, p. 271), it

also deflects attention away from the responsibility for instigating climate action that is in fact afforded by the efficacy of truly influential societal actors. Both, influential agents' high efficacy and individuals' miniscule efficacy, by comparison, are denied in this instance. Yet, this almost non-existent efficacy of the individual is also often cited as justification for not acting: what difference does it make in a world with 7,7 billion carbon-emitting individuals if I leave my car today and cycle to work? "There is the problem that some people [...] feel powerless as they are such a tiny cog in a big wheel" (Blake, 1999, p. 266). Messages that appeal to the morality or 'green conscience' (cf. e.g., Geo Magazin, 2000; Jonas, 2018) of individuals can cause frustration as the effect of foregoing consumption will remain unnoticeable. "Reducing your own carbon footprint to zero is a noble gesture, but it's less than a drop in the bucket" (Wagner and Weitzman, 2015, p. 130f.). This results in the paradox that "any individual act of responsibility can feel *ir*responsible, an act of complicity in a collective dance of self-delusion" (Szerszynski, 2007, p. 338, orig. emph.).

2.3 Efficacy

Renowned social psychologist Albert Bandura defines *self-efficacy* as "the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the causes of action required to manage prospective situations" (1977, p. 2). Feelings of helplessness or powerlessness also play a particularly decisive role in the realm of climate action:

> People's beliefs about their capabilities affect what they choose to do, how much effort they mobilize, how long they will persevere in the face of difficulties, whether they engage in self-debilitating or self-encouraging thought patterns, and the amount of stress and depression they experience in taxing situations.

Bandura, 1994, p. 2

Heidbrink also underscores the need to consider responsibility *together with* efficacy in his demand for a substantial re-examination of the notion of responsibility according to the practical efficacy agents hold (2003).

Efficacy denied by corporate agents

When wondering who else in society holds the power to truly make a difference for climate action one necessarily arrives at the group of corporate agents, as they significantly contribute to greenhouse gas emissions (and if they changed their ways, society would achieve considerable progress): "The relationship between the industrial corporation and the earth is almost purely exploitative" (Ikerd, 2005, p. 55).