

**OVERVIEW**

# The ethics of climate activism

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**Abstract**

Climate activism, and ethical reflection on it, is expanding in line with increased awareness of global warming's destructive effects. The ethics of climate activism has focused on two main questions. First, is there a duty to engage in climate activism? Answers to this question differ regarding how the duty is grounded, how demanding it is, and whether people in certain social roles have special duties to engage in climate activism. The second question is whether certain forms of climate activism are morally permissible, given certain frequently voiced concerns. Prominently, concerns about climate activism being ineffective, uninclusive, undemocratic, and violent. The review ends by pointing to other issues that the ethics of climate activism is likely to address in the near future.

This article is categorized under:

Climate, Nature, and Ethics > Ethics and Climate Change

**KEYWORDS**

climate activism, demandingness, democracy, duty, efficacy

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades climate activism, and ethical reflection on it, have multiplied in line with increased awareness of global warming's destructive effects and the short timeframe for effective mitigation. This article reviews two main research areas in the ethics of climate activism: whether there is a duty to engage in climate activism—its grounds and demandingness—, and the ethical concerns about climate activism—prominently, concerns about it being ineffective, uninclusive, undemocratic, and violent.

The article adopts a broad definition of climate activism. Activism is a confrontational activity that contributes (or whose actors believe or claim that it contributes) to preventing (or to expressing opposition to) impersonally bad or unjust outcomes. Climate activism focuses on those bad and unjust outcomes that are caused by anthropogenic global warming.

This broad definition of climate activism is intended to capture the whole range of more and less confrontational forms of activism, that is, forms that challenge or violate social and legal norms to a larger or lesser extent. Less confrontational forms include (a) public advocacy, such as creating, supporting, and joining climate NGOs and think tanks; (b) lobbying of governments and other organizations by citizens, NGOs, professional associations, and corporations; (c) shareholder activism, and cooperative board stewardship; (d) litigation, and (e) boycotts. More confrontational forms include (f) protests, both legal and illegal; and (g) direct action (as defined in Section 3.3).

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The article reviews publications on the ethics of climate activism, leaving aside the large wealth of publications on the ethics of ecological, environmental, and green activism that do not explicitly address climate activism.

## 2 | A DUTY TO BECOME A CLIMATE ACTIVIST?

One of the more developed debates is whether individuals have a duty to engage in climate activism. What grounds could this duty have? How demanding is it? Could the duty be grounded in certain social roles?

### 2.1 | Grounds

An often-mentioned ground for the duty to engage in climate activism is the moderate principle of beneficence (Booth, 2012, p. 399; Cripps, 2013, p. 13). This principle, originally formulated by Peter Singer, requires the individual to prevent serious suffering in others, when the individual can do so at less than significant cost to herself (Singer, 1972, p. 231). If climate activism can help prevent serious climate harms to others, without imposing significant costs to activists, individuals have a duty to engage in climate activism. The principle applies to climate activism, arguably, despite the fact that climate change often causes suffering to beings that are distant in temporal, geographic, and species terms, and through complex, diffuse, and long-term causation paths (Booth, 2012, p. 399).

The duty to engage in climate activism can be grounded in the similar, but more restricted, imperative of preventing catastrophic harm (Caney, 2014, p. 144). The claim is that when harm threatens to be not merely serious but catastrophic, duties should be allocated on the basis of capacity, or power, to prevent that harm (Caney, 2014, p. 142; Fahlquist, 2009). If climate change threatens catastrophic harm, individuals should engage in activism if this can help prevent that harm.

These harm-prevention principles apply not only to cases where an activist can unilaterally prevent serious suffering, but also to cases where the individual can only prevent suffering by cooperating with others, either by acting within existing organizations or by contributing to creating them (Cripps, 2013, pp. 50, 143). Often climate activism is understood as a “second-order” duty to make sure that other agents with more capacity for addressing climate change, such as governments, fulfill their “first-order” duty to address it (Caney, 2014, 2021, sec. 5.3; Collins & Lawford-Smith, 2016; Cripps, 2013, pp. 143–144).

An alternative ground for the duty to engage in climate activism is the no harm principle (Cripps, 2013, p. 11). This principle requires individuals to avoid inflicting serious harm on others, including future generations (Cripps, 2013, p. 88; Cripps, 2022, p. 39). Individuals, however, cannot meet this principle simply by abstaining from emitting activities, because climate harms are causally overdetermined, or climate harms are insensitive to minuscule changes in total global emissions (cf. Broome, 2019, pp. 116–120; Cripps, 2013, p. 123; Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2018, pp. 172–173; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2005, pp. 298–299). Instead, the principle requires individuals to act—notably by engaging in activism—so as to form or motivate the kind of collective action that is needed to prevent climate harms (Björnsson, 2021; Cripps, 2013, pp. 22, 143).

Another way to ground a duty to engage in climate activism is by appealing to Iris Marion Young’s social connection model of political responsibility (Young, 2010). Unlike the no harm principle, this model highlights the role that legal and social norms have in encouraging and enabling harm, and how innocent individual acts help reproduce those norms (Godoy, 2017a, 2017c; McKeown, 2018). This sort of connection to harm grounds a responsibility to engage in political activism with others to change the norms that enable the harm. In the climate case, these norms include the property laws that enable the fossil-fuel based economy, and which arguably give many individuals no meaningful choice but to use fossil-fuel energy. Another important set of norms is the international legal system that gives little to no influence to people in climate-vulnerable countries over political decisions in other countries that decide their climate future. The social connection model thus grounds a duty to engage in climate activism and resist these norms (Godoy, 2017a, 2017c; Sardo, 2020).

Finally, the duty to engage in climate activism can be grounded in the Rawlsian natural duty of justice (Rawls, 1971, p. 115). This duty requires individuals to support and comply with institutions when they are just; and when institutions are unjust, individuals have a duty to do their share in bringing about just institutions (Rawls, 1971, p. 334). Regarding climate change, the natural duty of justice is often interpreted as requiring individuals to engage in forms of activism that target official climate-related behavior and norms, such as “voting for the right government based

on their climatic agenda, lobbying for better regulation and restrictions on industrial and agricultural activities, calling out legislators who do not support laws that will help reduce collective emissions, putting pressure on governments to adopt global agreements on climate change, inciting educational reforms to promote understanding of climate change science” (Tan, 2015, p. 146; see also Neuteleers, 2010, pp. 513–514).

## 2.2 | Demandingness

The demandingness problem arises because in many activist causes there is no limit to how much time and effort a person could potentially devote and still not fully address the cause. In the case of the climate cause the demandingness concern is probably even more severe because certain important climate reforms are especially hard to push for (see Section 3.1). There is consensus that there are limits to the duty’s demandingness, but there is disagreement on where the limit falls.

Elizabeth Cripps developed what is probably the most demanding view. On Cripps’s view the duty is grounded in the no harm principle and the moderate principle of beneficence, both of which set the limit at never requiring the activist to engage in activities that interfere with the exercise of one of her central human functionings (Cripps, 2013, p. 14). Yet Cripps moderates her view in three ways. First, activists are not required to suffer even temporary interference with their basic human functionings—suffering incarceration, even for a few days, or suffering temporary excruciating pain, such as from police pepper spray, is not required. Secondly, recognizing that different individuals have different power and ability to engage in activism, individuals cannot be blamed for achieving less than others, but only for putting in less effort (Cripps, 2013, pp. 23, 162–163). Third, most people need not devote their lives to climate activism. As long as some people are, the rest can meet their duty by supporting them (Cripps, 2013, p. 149).

Cripps has recently expanded her view, claiming that perhaps individuals should be willing to bear “significant” costs. “Significant” ranges from revising their important life projects—at least when these are largely freely chosen—to even enduring interference with basic functionings—such as when activists everywhere risk arrest, or when activists in Colombia, the Philippines and elsewhere risk being murdered. However, Cripps remains officially agnostic on where exactly to draw the line (Cripps, 2022, pp. 181–183).

The least demanding views are based on the idea of personal freedom. These views start from the general premise that basic liberties have strict priority over concerns for the public good (Nagel, 2003, p. 67; Rawls, 2005, p. 294). One alleged implication is that duties to engage in climate activism never require individuals to incur too much cost, in the sense that activists should always be left with room for developing their own lives in accordance with what they believe worth pursuing (Neuteleers, 2010, pp. 506, 508). Another possible implication is that strictly speaking there is no duty to engage in climate activism. The claim is not that there is no duty to engage in any kind of activist cause, but that individuals are morally allowed to choose the social cause they feel more inclined to address—which may well not be the climate cause (Shahar, 2016).

## 2.3 | Role duties

Beyond a general obligation to engage in climate activism, some individuals may have special obligations grounded in their particular social roles. Most ethical reflection focuses on professional roles. Professionals may be under a duty to engage in activism because of their expert knowledge, their positions of influence, and the privileges that society has granted to their professions (Thompson, 2020).

Ethical reflection has mainly focused on health professionals, engineers, and academics. Health professionals enjoy high levels of trust, are well trained as communicators, and typically take a professional oath to care for other people’s lives and health, and so may be duty bound to become agents of systemic change for the sake of “planetary health” (Wabnitz et al., 2020; see also Bennett et al., 2020; Clery et al., 2022; Kemple, 2020). There may however be conflicts between the goals of planetary health and patient health, for example, in cases of patient treatments that emit large amounts of GHG (Wiesing, 2022). Engineers enable the most emitting activities, and can develop technological solutions for mitigation and adaptation. The engineering profession could therefore adopt a code of ethics demanding a commitment to the climate cause, with sanctions ranging from warnings to revoking an engineer’s chartered status (Lawlor & Morley, 2017). Finally, academics who pursue climate scholarship may be under a professional duty to

engage in climate politics as advocates, not just as impartial analysts and scientists. This duty stems from academics' ability as experts, and from their responsibility as teachers (Capstick et al., 2022; Green, 2020; Oreskes, 2020).

A subgroup of academics whose role duties have been—perhaps unsurprisingly—the focus of substantial ethical reflection are political philosophers, political theorists, ethicists, and other normative academics. Many believe that normative academics can help expose and criticize the ideas about nature and human nature that may have caused or facilitated the climate crisis (Callicott, 2010). Others believe that these academics can influence climate action by issuing practical recommendations.

If these normative academics issue practical recommendations, one important question is whether they should use a “principles-first” method or an “engaged” method (Green & Brandstedt, 2020). The principles-first method starts from general, impartially justified, universally binding principles, which the academic then applies to the climate action case by making general recommendations to all citizens—such as the recommendation that people should become climate activists—or to heterogeneous groups of agents—such as the recommendation to high-income countries that they should bear most mitigation costs. However, agents often find applying general recommendations to their particular circumstances hard, and often the concrete responsibilities for particular agents remain uncertain. Moreover, many agents lack the motivation to act on their responsibilities, as these agents are often part of the problem (Green & Brandstedt, 2020, pp. 9–13).

The alternative is the engaged method. This method involves substantial interaction between the academic and an “agent of change,” that is, an individual or group agent that is both capable and motivated to bring about justice (Laurence, 2020), in our case climate justice. Normative academics can engage in ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., with labor unions in carbon-intensive sectors), participate and identify with a social movement (e.g., the “environmental justice” movement), or contribute to an interdisciplinary committee (e.g., at an NGO). In these engagements, the academic describes and interprets the normative demands and opportunities faced by situated agents of change, and potentially make practical recommendations (Green & Brandstedt, 2020; see also Baer & Singer, 2014, p. 71; Lahikainen, 2018, chapter 6).

Principles-first and engaged methods relate to theoretical skills. Academics, however, typically have other skills and roles that they can put to work in particular forms of climate activism. Academics can use their teaching skills for integrating climate change into their teaching, even in seemingly unrelated topics. They can use their discussion facilitator skills in organizing events on climate change for the broader public, and in counteracting misuse and misinterpretation of climate research (Chislenko, 2022; Roos & Hoffart, 2021). Academics can also use their administrative and committee skills in supporting climate organizations, and in advocating for mitigation or adaptation practices in their workplace or other organizations. Finally, academics can use their research skills in collecting and sharing important information, such as climate-related syllabi, or information about planned mitigation projects in their jurisdiction (Chislenko, 2022).

The professional class is perhaps overrepresented in the climate movement. This may have led to an excessive focus on knowledge and technology as the solution to the climate crisis, and to downplaying power as the main obstacle. Perhaps the working class can, through the power of numbers, bring about change, particularly in the electricity sector (Huber, 2022a). Alternatively, investors and corporate leaders may have the ability, motivation, and responsibility to drive climate-aligned change through corporate decarbonization, divestment, shareholder activism, and political lobbying (Collins, 2020; Godoy, 2017b; Harper Ho, 2021; Hormio, 2017; Schwenkenbecher, 2018).

## 3 | CONCERNS

### 3.1 | Efficacy

Some forms of climate activism may be causally inefficacious in promoting climate goals. This is an ethically relevant concern because activism often imposes costs on others. If a behavior imposes costs on others, and it is causally inefficacious in producing the desired good, this is often a decisive reason against the behavior (Maltais, 2013, p. 602).

The worry about inefficacy is in several ways more serious with regards to climate activism than to activism in other areas. Climate change has some features of a global collective action problem (Stern et al., 2007; Giddens, 2009; Ostrom, 2009; Keohane & Victor, 2016; cf. Aklin & Mildenerger, 2018; Colgan et al., 2021). Thus, effective activism would need to happen across national borders (de Moor, 2018), and in most countries, including those with authoritarian governments. Moreover, the climate benefits (as opposed to climate co-benefits) that activists seek are dispersed in space and time, instead of mainly benefiting the community where activism takes place. In jurisdictions with high

levels of electoral competition elected officials are therefore less likely to produce ambitious but potentially politically costly climate policy, even under pressure from activists (Finnegan, 2022). Finally, activism typically lets people pursue other important goods such as self-assertion and solidarity. Yet climate activism seems to be inefficacious in this regard too. Self-assertion and solidarity require confronting those who perpetrate the relevant injustice. Climate harms reach temporally into the far future, so perpetrators are often dead when the victims want to confront them (McLaughlin, 2022). Some aspects of the climate cause, however, may facilitate efficacious activism. There is almost complete scientific consensus that climate change is anthropogenic and potentially highly destructive (Oreskes, 2004), which might strengthen climate activist claims. Additionally, climate change has the potential to negatively impact many other activist causes (extreme poverty, migration, pollution), which may facilitate activist coalitions (Green, 2018, pp. 109–110).

The worry about inefficacy is amplified when we adopt the perspective of the individual climate activist. Some individuals in positions of formal and informal power can surely make a substantial difference to climate goals. Supreme justices, presidents, legislators, public figures, journalists can often unilaterally decisively influence the legal and social norms that impact GHG emissions levels, and adaptation efforts. Most individuals, however, cannot make that kind of unilateral difference and can, at best, make a difference for a certain group, which can itself make a difference to legal or social norms. For example, an individual with high legal skills can make a difference to a climate litigation activist group, which in turn can make a difference in decisive climate litigation cases. However, many individuals probably cannot make even this kind of difference for a group. One additional demonstrator in a climate protest, or one additional vote for a green party, for example, typically does not make a difference to a climate protest's political impact or to election results (Nefsky, 2019, no. 9, 2021, pp. 201–202).

There are two potential responses to the individual-level inefficacy concern (for a review, see Fragnière, 2016; Nefsky, 2019). One response is to argue that people can have a reason to engage in climate activism even when activism is not causally efficacious in promoting climate mitigation. Individuals may still have a reason to avoid contributing to harmful social structures (Kutz, 2007, pp. 188–189; McPherson, 2021), do their part in a collective effort to prevent harm (Cullity, 2000; Cullity, 2020), display virtuous character traits (Jamieson, 2007), and express concern for climate victims (Brennan, 2009; Lane, 2018, pp. 171–172).

The other potential response is to claim that any individual activist could make a substantial difference. This response has three versions. One version—which applies not only to activism but to all behavior—claims that what matters is not just the difference an individual is certain to make, but the expected difference she can make. If the difference that an individual climate activist might make is very large, an individual can have a reason to act even if the likelihood of making that difference is extremely low (Björnsson, 2021; Vanderheiden, 2018). Another version highlights that no activist can ever reliably ascertain other people's likelihood of joining her initiative and together making a difference, so she should never rule out trying to mobilize others (Lane, 2018, p. 171). A related version emphasizes that activist acts are not “one-off bets,” but can be “added to, complemented, and improved, both by the individual and by others” (Cripps, 2013, p. 148).

Worries about inefficacy in the face of already devastating climate impacts raise the question of whether activists should still have hope or should instead despair. Some argue that hope can be instrumentally valuable precisely when the probabilities of success are low (Moellendorf, 2022), or unknown (Lane, 2018). Moreover, despair can have an immobilizing effect on activists, making the desired outcomes even less likely (Moellendorf, 2022), so despairing may be morally wrong (Dout & Obst, 2022; Monbiot, 2019b). Yet there may be instrumental value in despair too. By keeping the possibility of failure in the foreground instead of the background, despair may help activists guard against some dangers of false hope, such as distorting the actual probability of success, being complacent with one's own—and others'—current level of effort, and fixating on unwinnable climate causes at the cost of less ambitious but winnable ones (Huber, 2022b; van der Lugt, 2022).

### 3.2 | Inclusiveness

Some climate movements have been criticized for (a) being composed mostly of white, and middle- and upper-class individuals, (b) engaging in activist practices that are too costly, or unattractive, for many people—such as the practice of seeking arrest for civil disobedience—, and (c) adopting a narrative that ignores or downplays the fact that climate harms fall disproportionately on vulnerable people (Cripps, 2022, p. 177; Dhaliwal, 2019; Gobby, 2020; Hermes, 2020; Shand-Baptiste, 2019; Wretched of the Earth, 2015, 2019).

These features are worrisome in themselves, as possible expressions of racism, colonialism, and other forms of injustice (James & Mack, 2020). They are instrumentally worrisome too. Climate movements that attract fewer and less diverse members have lower force-in-numbers, lower epistemic ability to discover effective activist means and appropriate climate aims, and less ability to forge solidaristic alliances with movements that pursue other social causes (see Bell & Bevan, 2021, p. 1216).

The activist movement Extinction Rebellion (XR) has been the main target of these concerns, and some evidence suggests that the group's composition, practices, and narratives have indeed repelled non-white and working-class people (Bell & Bevan, 2021). In response, the group has revised its narrative and practices (Hayes & Doherty, 2019; Monbiot, 2019b).

### 3.3 | Democracy

Most forms of climate activism are compatible with democratic ideals. Litigation, shareholder activism, and public advocacy are well within democratic norms and democratically enacted laws (Holden, 2002, pp. 139–147). More confrontational forms, however, have a less straightforward relation with democracy. Explaining this relation requires introducing certain distinctions.

The two main forms of more confrontational climate activism are protests and direct action. A climate protest is a confrontational, public, and often collective act that tries to achieve climate goals primarily through changing social and legal norms. A climate direct action is a confrontational, often covert act that tries to achieve its climate goals primarily through coercively stopping emitting behaviors—and changing social and legal norms only as an (often desirable) side effect (for a list of alternative definitions of climate direct action, see Kurtz, 2020, pp. 262–264).

Climate protests are much more visible than direct action. The activist movements that catch most media attention, such as XR and Fridays For Future, explicitly aim at changing legislation and executive decisions, as well as changing social norms about leisure and consumption. Some movements and authors, however, advocate direct action. They recognize the importance of protests, but also advocate or engage in, for example, blocking or destroying fossil fuel refineries, pipelines, and power plants (e.g., Shut it Down, The Valve Turners, 350 New Hampshire, #NoCoalNoGas, Folk mot Fossilgas), sabotaging high-emissions vehicles (e.g., Malm, 2021, p.79), or disrupting auctions for oil and gas leases (e.g., in 2008 Tim deChristopher famously disrupted an oil and gas auction in Utah by outbidding fossil fuel companies). These actions aim at stopping emitting behaviors directly, as opposed to stopping them by means of—or as a means for—pushing for norm reform.

It is also useful to distinguish between two kinds of protest: persuasive and cost-levying (Humphrey, 2007, p. 98). Persuasive protests seek norm change through appeals to reasons, whereas cost-levying protests seek norm change by increasing the costs to others of not adopting new norms.

Persuasive climate protests are sometimes criticized, especially in news outlets, as undemocratic because protesters often disobey democratically enacted laws (Fabian, 2019; Keulemans, 2019; Sky News Australia, 2019). XR activists illegally block roads, and children on Fridays For Future strikes disobey laws mandating school attendance. This worry about undemocratic disobedience applies to all illegal protests, climate and non-climate, and to illegal direct action as well. One response to this worry is that persuasive climate disobedience is essentially an appeal to reasons. This can be consistent with democratic ideals, particularly when democracy is understood as centrally involving public deliberation (Humphrey, 2007, pp. 99–101; Scheuerman, 2022, p. 796).

Cost-levying protests face a more serious democratic objection. Most conceptions of democracy reject as undemocratic any attempt by a group to change legal and social norms by threatening to raise the costs for others. Especially when the group is self-selected, and disconnected from the majority, as climate protesters can be (Humphrey, 2007, p. 62). Note, however, that what looks like a cost-levying protest is often just a form of persuasive protest. Impolite, uncivil, disruptive acts may be necessary for introducing topics into public debates and for challenging established ways of thinking and feeling about climate issues. Thus, many disruptive forms of persuasive climate protest are generally thought to be compatible with democracy (Humphrey, 2007, pp. 99–100), and can also help develop the kind of transnational public sphere that is needed to adequately address climate change (Smith, 2017).

Some climate protests, however, can be described as properly cost levying and not (just) persuasive. For example, Roger Hallam—one of XR's co-founders—vindicates XR's use of road blockades for their ability to “impose the necessary economic cost to bring the authorities to the table” (Hallam, 2019, pp. 7, 37).

At least two arguments can be offered for the claim that cost-levying climate protests can in fact be compatible with the democratic ideal. The first argument starts from the premise that climate policymaking is typically dominated by obstructionist corporate influence, and is therefore largely undemocratic. Cost-levying climate protests, especially when directed against obstructing corporations, can in this context work as a counteracting force, partially restoring the equality of power that democracy requires (Aitchison, 2018, p. 674). This argument is less strong, however, when cost-levying climate protests target not corporations but governments themselves (Garcia-Gibson, 2021). Another argument thus points out that climate policymaking is undemocratic in the further sense that those who are most affected by climate change are often disenfranchised: children, and climate-vulnerable people who live outside the policymaking jurisdiction. Cost-levying climate protests that target governments can then be understood as giving political influence to those who are disenfranchised, either directly (when the disenfranchised themselves protest) or indirectly (when protesters act as their representatives; Celikates, 2016, p. 990; Mattheis, 2022, p. 11).

Direct climate action probably faces the strongest democratic challenge. Much like cost-levying protests, direct action is an attempt to impose a decision without, or at least regardless of, persuading the public that the decision is desirable. Additionally, direct action often does not even attempt to change public norms (so the two democratic defenses of cost-levying protests do not straightforwardly work here), and is typically covert or secret, escaping ex-ante public scrutiny. One example is Ruby Montoya and Jessica Reznicek's actions between 2016 and 2017. They tried to stop the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline by stealthily destroying building machinery, and blow-torching pipeline valves (Shipley, 2021).

A common defense of direct action highlights again the claim that climate policymaking is often captured by corporations and does not properly count as democratic, so the only effective way of mitigating climate change is through direct action (Jensen et al., 2011, p. 11; Mann & Wainwright, 2018, p. 173). Another—more overtly antidemocratic—defense of direct climate action highlights the short timeframe for mitigating the worst impacts of climate change. Protests—especially persuasive protests—, and democratic processes in general, are too slow for dealing with a climate emergency (Jensen et al., 2011, p. 109).

### 3.4 | Non-violence

Advocates of climate disruptive activism are sometimes in favor of violence against property, and sometimes even against humans (Jensen, 2011; Jensen et al., 2011; Malm, 2021). Violence against property has been vindicated and practiced by environmental activists for decades (Humphrey, 2007, p. 30). Yet this violence seems more likely justified in climate activism given the short timeframe left for mitigation and how serious climate harms can get. Violence against property has also been vindicated as a challenge to the private property norms that enable the fossil fuel economy (Lossin, 2021). Finally, violent climate activism has been vindicated as a form of defense against violent aggression. Carbon emissions are sometimes understood as a form of violent attack against humans, non-humans, and the planet, so using force in response is justified (Jensen, 2011, pp. 77–86; Malm, 2021, p. 161). In reality, climate activism has engaged in only very limited violence, and almost exclusively against property (Scheuerman, 2022, p. 803).

Violence in climate activism has been criticized as ineffective. Citing Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's work on non-violent resistance (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008), activists in XR and other movements have claimed that massive non-violent protests involving at least 3.5% of the population are the most effective way to achieve ambitious climate policy, whereas violent resistance is counter-productive both because it alienates potential adherents, and because it can trigger violent governmental repression (Rebellion, 2022). Chenoweth and Stephan's findings, however, are about overthrowing authoritarian governments. These findings, therefore, do not straightforwardly apply to climate activism, which often does not aim at overthrowing a government but at profoundly changing the energy matrix, as well as production and consumption practices; and climate activism often takes place in—at least formally—democratic contexts (Scheuerman, 2022, p. 791).

## 4 | FUTURE RESEARCH

The ethics of climate activism is a nascent and burgeoning field. Publications raising new questions, and new answers to existing questions, will surely see the light in the short and medium term. Recent academic events on

climate activism and related fields suggest that we are likely to see work on (i) the efficacy concern, particularly on how there can be reasons for climate activism even when it is causally inefficacious; (ii) solidarity and intersectionality between climate and other activist movements, including feminist, anti-racist, animal rights, and anti-pollution activism; (iii) climate political violence against body and property, its definition and justifiability; (iv) the “hope or despair” debate; (v) the ethics of particular tactics such as climate strikes (including birth strikes) and climate litigation.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Francisco Garcia-Gibson:** Investigation (lead); writing – original draft (lead); writing – review and editing (lead).

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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## RELATED WIREs ARTICLES

[Climate change and individual duties](#)

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## FURTHER READING

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