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Isolationism and the equal per capita view

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ABSTRACT

In climate ethics, there is a debate about how the carbon budget, in terms of emissions permits, should be divided between people. One popular proposal, sometimes called The Equal per Capita View, says that everyone should have an equal share of the available emissions permits. Several authors have objected to this view, arguing that: (i) the equal per capita view implies isolationism since it treats emissions permits in isolation from other considerations of justice such as development, poverty and trade; and (ii) isolationism is implausible since it yields a number of problematic implications; therefore (iii) the equal per capita view is implausible. I examine this argument against the equal per capita view by scrutinizing the presumed problematic implications of isolationism. I show that they are either mistakenly inferred from isolationism or irrelevant as to whether isolationism is plausible or not. I conclude that the equal per capita view should not be discarded for being an isolationist approach. Rather, both isolationism and the equal per capita view should be considered as potential action guides. This result is of relevance to the climate political debate, since it could promote progress in the climate negotiations that are needed for limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, as set by the Paris Agreement.

KEYWORDS Isolationism; integrationism; emissions permits; emissions distribution; equal per capita; climate change

In the climate ethics literature, as well as in climate politics, there is a debate about how the atmosphere's natural capacity to absorb greenhouse gases should be divided among people (see, e.g., Broome 2012, Gardiner *et al.* 2010, Garvey 2008). In other words, this debate concerns the question of how to fairly distribute the amount of emissions that are compatible with climate stability. One of the major stumbling blocks in current climate policy is due to a disagreement on this issue. The political consequences of this debate in climate ethics are thus substantial.

Fundamentally, this debate concerns which principle for distribution of emissions permits is most plausible. Some ethicists – including Singer (2010), Attfield (2003), Jamieson (2005), and Broome (2012) – have proposed a so-called 'Equal per Capita View', according to which everyone should have an

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equal per capita share of the atmospheric absorptive capacity, and thus an equal right to emit greenhouse gases.¹ Others, however, have objected to the equal per capita view. One influential argument, presented in various ways by Posner and Weisbach (2010), Caney (2012), Margalioth and Rudich (2013), and Roser and Seidel (2017), goes as follows:

(P1) The equal per capita view implies isolationism.

(P2) Isolationism is implausible.

Therefore,

(A) The equal per capita view is implausible.

The argument for (P1) is that the equal per capita view treats emissions permits in isolation from other considerations of justice – such as trade, development, poverty, and health. This is uncontroversial, and thus I shall not discuss it further. The crucial premise is (P2), which will here be the main focus. The main argument for (P2) is that isolationism is supposed to yield a number of problematic implications:

- (i) It disregards that emissions permits are substitutable,
- (ii) It disregards that people have different needs,
- (iii) It disregards differences in benefits and costs related to climate change mitigation,
- (iv) It disregards issues of causal responsibility, and
- (v) It makes the equal per capita view politically unfeasible.

Below, I examine these putative implications of isolationism for the equal per capita view. I show that they are either mistakenly inferred from isolationism or that they are irrelevant as to whether isolationism is plausible or not. Consequently, I argue, the equal per capita view cannot be discarded on the grounds that it is an isolationist approach. I start by clarifying the basics of isolationism and the equal per capita view, and explicate the environmental political stakes for this climate ethics debate.

1. The Basics of Isolationism and The Equal per Capita View

There is a fixed limit on the volume of greenhouse gases that the atmosphere can absorb before triggering dangerous climate change. This absorptive capacity of the atmosphere provides an ecosystem service that can be treated as a common global good. One of the debates in climate ethics concerns the question of how this absorptive capacity, in terms of emissions permits, should be divided between people. The equal per capita view is an answer to this question – it says that everyone has an equal right to emit. The intuition behind the equal per capita view is, to borrow Broome's words,

that '[i]t seems obvious that no one in the world has a stronger claim to this resource [i.e. permits to emit greenhouse gas] than anyone else, so it should be divided equally between people' (Broome 2012, p. 70).

Although climate ethicists are not basically interested in emissions permits *as such*, but rather in the *benefits* that can be produced by emissions permits (e.g. capabilities or opportunities for wellbeing), the equal per capita view is not directly concerned with the distribution of such benefits. It is rather concerned with the distribution of one important resource – emissions permits – considered as a means to such benefits. This is also what makes the equal per capita view an isolationist approach. To use Caney's terminology, it treats climate responsibilities '... in isolation from considerations about global and intergenerational justice in general (including issues such as trade, development, poverty, and health)' (Caney 2012, p. 259). Isolationism (or the 'Method of Isolation', as he also labels it) thus stands in contrast to what he calls 'integrationism' (or the 'Method of Integration') which '... treats climatic responsibilities in light of a general account of global justice' (2012, p. 259). This is also what makes it implausible according to the opponents of the equal per capita view.

Rival principles to the equal per capita view are typically *integrationist* rather than isolationist, since they propose that emissions permits are distributed in the light of other considerations of justice. For instance, the so-called 'Grandfathering view' takes *reliance* on emissions (depending on lifestyles, investments, plans and preferences for the future, etc.) as its main consideration, while the so-called 'Subsistence view' takes people's *needs* as its main consideration.² As this indicates, integrationism comes in degrees, since more or fewer considerations of justice could be included when determining the fair distribution of emissions permits.

This is also what makes the debate regarding isolationism and integrationism interesting. For, if the opponents to isolationism are correct about its being implausible, then the principles that are isolationist, such as the equal per capita view, should plausibly be rejected in favor of some integrationist principle. But if isolationism can be defended, then these principles will not have to be rejected (at least not for the reason that they are isolationist). Moreover, since the equal per capita view is among the most popular principles in climate politics, this issue merits a careful examination.

This also unveils the climate political stakes for this climate ethics debate. Indeed, ethical distribution principles for emissions permits – such as the equal per capita view – fill an action-guiding function for climate politics. The direction in which further climate policies should be taken depends on which of these principles are most appropriate. Currently, the issue about how to distribute the burdens of climate change constitutes one of the major stumbling blocks in international climate politics. Broome (2012, p. 68), for instance, says that it is 'the most hotly debated topic in all the politics of

climate change'. The fact that there is yet no agreement regarding which distribution principle is most plausible hinders further progress in climate negotiations. Making progress in this climate ethics debate is therefore central for achieving the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, as set by the Paris Agreement.

Before undertaking an investigation of the debate concerning isolationism and integrationism, it is worth noting that it is not only integrationism that comes in degrees. As we shall see below, even isolationism can be understood in more or less inclusive terms. One reason is that it is an open question whether the equal per capita view takes into account *past emissions*. Roser and Seidel, for instance, claim that it 'does not include historical emissions' (Roser and Seidel 2017, p. 156). Caney, however, thinks there are two versions of the view with respect to past emissions: one history-sensitive (that takes them into account) and one history-insensitive (that does not). Although Caney aims to 'criticize the principle at the heart of all of these versions of the equal per capita view' (2012, p. 262), I will argue below that the history-sensitive version is not vulnerable to his objections, and that the history-sensitive version is more plausible than the history-insensitive version.

The equal per capita view can also be more or less isolationist depending on the extent to which it is compatible with other distributive tools – such as an emissions trading system, or supplementary principles dealing with other issues of justice. I will argue that the presumed repugnant implications of the equal per capita view can be inferred only given a *too* isolationist interpretation of the view.

I will now examine the objections to isolationism and, in effect, to the equal per capita view.

2. Isolationism Disregards that Emissions Permits are Substitutable

Caney (2012) argues that isolationism is implausible partly because it ignores that emissions permits are substitutable by other goods. He brings up two general challenges to the equal per capita view in this regard:

First General Challenge: If distributive justice is concerned with the fair share of a "total package" of goods, then we have *no* reason to endorse a principle that applies solely to one particular item, such as greenhouse gas emissions. If this is right then [...] it does not make sense to refer to the fair distribution of greenhouse gases. (2012, p. 271)

Second General Challenge: The equal per capita view's focus on distributing permits to emit greenhouse gases is inappropriate because these permits are substitutable in a narrow sense. The specific goods that are associated with permits to emit greenhouse gases can be provided in other ways. Since this is

so, it is a mistake to claim that there is a principle of justice governing the distribution of rights to emit greenhouse gases [...]. (2012, p. 285)

The First General Challenge focuses on what Caney calls 'Wide Substitutability', which exploits 'the possibility of some having fewer permits to emit greenhouse gases so long as they have a correspondingly greater share of other goods' (2012, p. 283). For example, new technology is a wide substitute for oil since it could make an equal contribution (as the oil) to people's well-being. The Second General Challenge focuses on what Caney calls 'Narrow Substitutability', which exploits the possibility that different goods may 'possess the same kind of properties' (2012, p. 285). For example, coal and gas are narrow substitutes for oil since they share the same kind of property (i.e. being fossil fuels) that makes them suitable for the same purposes (i.e. for energy production).

Together, these two challenges suggest that emissions permits are substitutable in both a wide and a narrow sense. That is, they do not belong to any specific category of non-substitutable goods, such as 'sleep, food, water' (2012, p. 274). Nor should emissions permits be treated with otherwise special concern, such as 'the right to free speech and the right to freedom of conscience', since it has no 'special symbolic significance' (2012, p. 274). However, since the equal per capita view treats emission permits as non-substitutable by other goods, Caney argues that the equal per capita view is implausible.

I have two points to bring up in response to this objection. First, emissions permits are not *in general* widely and narrowly substitutable. Although people's *non-subsistence* emissions (i.e., emissions made to fulfill non-basic needs) are substitutable by other goods, people's *subsistence* emissions (i.e., emissions made to fulfill basic needs) are not. It is impossible to live even a minimally decent life without emitting any greenhouse gases, since production of food, commodities, transportation, and so on, yield emissions. In fact, it is impossible to even *survive* without emitting, since breathing and digesting give rise to emissions. If food, water and sleep should be considered non-substitutable for the reason that they are needed for human survival, then it seems that at least subsistence emissions should be so too – also because food production and water transportation require emissions.³

Perhaps one could question the relevance of the distinction between subsistence and non-subsistence emissions here. For one reason, the fulfillment of basic needs, just as the fulfillment of non-basic needs, depends on the availability of so-called 'satisfiers'. And the production of these satisfiers can be more or less emission-intensive, depending among other things on the technologies available. If there is a transformation to low-carbon economy, this will affect the substitutability of subsistence emissions. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether technological changes and low-carbon

alternatives will sufficiently reduce the amount of emissions that are needed to satisfy our basic needs. Even if that eventually happens, it remains the case that subsistence emissions are not substitutable at present.

It is unclear what the implications of this point are. After all, opponents of isolationism might simply retreat to the slightly weaker position that emissions permits can *often* be substituted for other goods. Thus, they might argue that the fact that they *cannot always* be substituted means only that we should insist that any principle for the distribution of emissions permits must guarantee that each person has the right to emit a *sufficient* quantity of greenhouse gases, and not an *equal* right to emit. Still, my point here is *not* that emissions rights should be distributed equally *just because* they are not generally substitutable. Rather, my point is simply that the substitutability issue does not provide an argument against isolationism in the emissions distribution debate.

This leads to my second point. Even if we assume both that emissions permits are substitutable and that distributive justice is fundamentally concerned with the fair share of a total package of goods, it does not follow that emissions permits should be distributed unequally in order to correct for existing inequalities between people. Interestingly, Posner and Weisbach, who also criticize isolationism, make a similar point: 'A climate change treaty is not the only method of redistributing wealth and is unlikely to be the best way. If there are better ways of redistributing wealth, we should not use a climate treaty to do so' (2010, p. 4).

The best way of making such redistributions depends, plausibly, on which goods produce the desired outcomes most efficiently. However, emissions permits seem not to be one of them. Using emissions permits as an equalizer would require a huge knowledge-gathering apparatus – not only regarding different people's current packages of goods and their different needs but also regarding their different capacities to convert emissions to capabilities or opportunities for well-being (or whatever we care fundamentally about). A better candidate in this redistributive respect is *money*. Interestingly, Caney discusses money as a distributive resource on several occasions (e.g. 2012, p. 281). But he does not say why we should not distribute emission permits equally and then use taxation (or similar methods) to deal with remaining inequalities. Nor do the other authors who charge the equal per capita view for treating emissions permits as non-substitutable. This emphasizes the political relevance of the distributive justice debate, since it makes clear that an isolationist treatment of emissions permits would actually be consistent with how other distributive issues are dealt with in real-world politics. I will get back to this in [section 6](#), as it relates to a more general defense of isolationism and the equal per capita view. At any rate, the substitutability objection fails to establish that isolationism is implausible, just as it fails to show that the equal per capita view is flawed.

3. Isolationism Disregards that People Have Different Needs

Another argument against the isolationist stance of the equal per capita view, provided by Caney (2012), Margalioth and Rudich (2013), and Roser and Seidel (2017), is that it fails to take into account people's different needs. Since it only cares about an equal distribution of emissions permits, it fails to respect that some people are poorer than others, and thus need more emissions permits than others. Also, it appears to ignore the fact that developed countries (typically the rich) have already emitted a lot during their development, which developing countries (typically the poor) need yet to do.

However, it should be noted that *if* we accept the opponents' claim that emissions permits are substitutable (as discussed in section 2), then we cannot conclude that the equal per capita view's recommendations are unfair to those with greater needs. If what matters is people's total package of goods, and if permits to emit greenhouse gasses are supposed to be substitutable by other goods, then an equal distribution of emissions permits does not imply that people have their needs satisfied to different degrees.⁴ There are other resources that can then be distributed in order to neutralize remaining inequalities.

Moreover, this objection seems to make sense only if an equal per capita distribution of emissions permits would in fact be insufficient for satisfying people's needs. Whether or not such a distribution is insufficient in this respect depends on empirical matters that are not yet settled. Suffice it to say that if the world will be successful in the transition to more or less carbon-free societies (consistent with the goals of the Paris Agreement), then this would not be unlikely. If the available carbon budget (i.e., atmospheric absorptive capacity) will thus be sufficient to fulfill everyone's basic needs, then the intuition behind this charge against the equal per capita view loses its force.

A more important reply to this objection stems from the observation that the equal per capita view can be considered an history-sensitive approach. In Caney's words, an history-sensitive version of the equal per capita view implies that "current and future allocations of emission permits should take past emissions into account, holding that those with a history of higher than equal emissions should have fewer emissions in the future" (2012, p. 261). Given the unequal past emissions of different countries, the *overall* equal distribution suggested by a history-sensitive version implies that *future* emissions permits should *not* be distributed equally – at least until an equilibrium is reached. This has the effect that, to quote Broome, "[t]hose who have already taken up a lot of space by emitting greenhouse gas in the past will consequently receive fewer annual permits to emit in the future" (2012, p. 70).

Now, since the current differences in needs between people are closely connected to their respective countries' development stage, which in turn is closely related to their historical emissions, the history-sensitive version of the equal per capita view will in fact account for this difference. Although it does not *directly* take into account people's different needs, it does so *indirectly*.

So, once differences in historical emissions have been taken into account, the amount of emissions that poor countries are entitled to will (typically) exceed the amount that they are actually emitting. Bangladeshis, for instance, who presently emit around 0,5 tons per capita annually will *not only* be allowed to emit 0,5 tons more *but also* an additional amount as compensation for their historically low emissions. Since the number of emissions permits that they do not need to use themselves can be sold to other countries, the revenues could be used to satisfy the needs of the Bangladeshis.

Posner and Weisbach object that this reply fails since 'some poor nations have very high per capita emissions. Many poor nations would be hurt, possibly severely' (2010, p. 121). Similarly, Margalioth and Rudich say that 'there are many developing countries on the list of top emitters, especially if we take changes in land use into account' (2013, p. 198). If they are right, it seems that even a history-sensitive version of the equal per capita view after all fails to take people's needs into consideration.

That there are many developing countries on the list of top emitters, however, depends in part on an implausible way to count emissions: a *production-based* emissions accounting. On such an accounting, people are charged for emissions that are due to the goods they *produce*. However, a *consumption-based* accounting charges people for the emissions that are due to the goods they *consume*. Although a production-based accounting has previously been standard for practical reasons, a consumption-based accounting is by many people considered more just since it does not charge people in poor countries for the emissions that are due to their products that are in the end consumed by people in rich countries. And on a consumption-based emissions accounting, developing countries are not found on the list of top-emitters, since they typically do not consume all of what they produce but rather export it to developed countries (Duus-Otterström and Hjorthen 2018).

Of course, there are problems with the consumption-based accounting too. For instance, it yields the counterintuitive implication that those who produce emissions bear no responsibility for the harmful effects of those emissions. Australia, for example, would not be charged at all for the emissions associated with its substantial coal exports. The same goes for oil-nations like Saudi-Arabia and Norway. Although this might sound counterintuitive, it is not the full picture. Australia, Saudi-Arabia, Norway, and any other net exporter of fossil fuels will indeed be charged

for the emissions that are due to the products they consume. It is just that they will not be charged for the emissions due to their exported products (coal and oil). Sure, one might still think that the most plausible emissions accounting is one on which responsibility for emissions is *shared* between producers and consumers (Lenzen *et al*, 2007). But, compared to the standard production-based accounting, such an accounting would still suffice to remove the poorest countries from the list of top emitters (Chancel and Piketty 2014).

Perhaps one could object that the history-sensitive version of the equal per capita view, on which my previous response relies, is implausible for ignoring the fact that justice is owed to particular individuals rather than to collectives of individuals. For example, the history-sensitive version of the equal per capita view implies that a present person in a Western (i.e., high-emitting) nation will get fewer emissions permits just because past people in that nation emitted more than their per capita share. Hence, the equal per capita view seems to disadvantage *some* particular persons (i.e., the present Westerners) for the harmful actions of *other* persons (i.e., the past Westerners), which may be regarded as unjust. This appears also to be the motivation of Roser and Seidel (2017, p. 156) for thinking that the most plausible version of the equal per capita view does not take into consideration historical emissions.

However, this objection *also* presupposes a pure production-based emissions accounting. For, the consumption-based accounting – or even a mixed accounting – can explain why present people in rich countries shall have fewer permits to emit than present people in poorer countries, while still focusing on particular individuals. This is due to the fact that present individuals in wealthy countries consume goods that their ancestors produced in the past. For example, most of the existing infrastructure in modern societies – including roads, health care and educational systems, high-technological equipment, and knowledge – are at least in part due to *past* productions of the industrialization. These productions involved emissions. When present people now consume these resources, the consumption-based accounting charges *them* for the emissions made in the production of these resources. Therefore, once we realize that the current production-based accounting is implausible, the individualist objection against the history-sensitive version of the equal per capita view is undermined.⁵

Indeed, the history-sensitive version of the equal per capita view is more plausible than a history-*insensitive* version of the view. Hence, although the equal per capita view is isolationist, it is not isolationist to the extent that it disregards historical emissions. Consequently, the problematic implications of such an extremely isolationist view cannot be taken for a general argument against the equal per capita view. Moreover, nothing prevents the equal per

capita view from being considered as a default position, where modifications could be made in order to deal with the fact that people have different needs. We shall return to this point in [section 6](#).

4. Isolationism Disregards Benefits and Costs Related to Climate Change Mitigation

It has been argued that isolationism implies that the equal per capita view fails to take into account the fact that people will *benefit* to different extents from climate change mitigation, and have different *costs* for mitigating climate change. Starting with the benefits, Posner and Weisbach argue that

... the benefits of reducing emissions vary, depending on many factors, such as exposure to sea level rise or changes in weather patterns, dependence on agriculture, location of valuable mineral deposits, susceptibility to disease, and the likelihood of refugees from neighboring states. The net benefits under a per capita allocation, therefore, would not be equal. (2010, p. 125)

In a similar vein, Margalioth and Rudich argue that those who will benefit more from staying within the atmospheric absorptive limit should receive fewer permits to emit than those who will not benefit (as much) from mitigation. They conclude that ‘we must deviate from the equal per-capita principle, which is implicitly based on the assumption that all human beings benefit from climate change mitigation to the same extent’ (2013, p. 204).

It can be questioned, first of all, whether the equal per capita view is based on the assumption that all human beings benefit from climate change mitigation to the same extent. Also, given that the main contributors to climate change are people in the rich countries, while the main beneficiaries of climate change mitigation are people in the poorer countries, it is implausible that those who benefit more from climate change mitigation should receive less emissions permits than those who benefit less from climate change mitigation. Moreover, it is not clear why people’s different benefits from mitigated climate change are at all relevant to the question regarding which principle for distribution of emissions permits is most plausible. I will get back to this shortly.

With regard to the different *costs* that people have for lowering their emissions to an equal per capita level, Margalioth and Rudich argue that people in Canada, for example, need more energy for heating due to the fact that it is colder in Canada than in many other countries. This means that climate change mitigation will imply higher costs for Canadians. They say:

We cannot seriously argue that all Canadians should leave Canada on a moral basis, because living there requires relatively high use of energy for heating purposes with the concomitantly high GHG [i.e. greenhouse gas] emissions per capita, and that if they choose to live there, they should pay a tax in the

form of having to buy emissions permits from people in other countries to maintain the same subsistence level; that is, to stay warm. (2013, p. 200-201)

Since something like this is what the equal per capita view would require, the equal per capita view appears to be implausible. Posner and Weisbach argue along the same lines. They think that ‘people who are most hurt by the abatement efforts mandated by the climate treaty should receive some kind of compensation’ (2010, p. 139).

In response to this objection it is worth emphasizing that, as Margalioth and Rudich indicate, the equal per capita view is compatible with a global emissions market where emissions permits can be traded between countries.⁶ As this implies, those who need more than their equal per capita share of emissions permits can thus buy them from those who use less than their equal per capita share. Given that Canadians are relatively rich, and could thus afford buying permits from other countries where people are typically poor, it does not seem unfair of the equal per capita view to require that they do.

Some might want to object here that since not all people who live in rich countries are themselves rich (including Canadians), some poor people (including poor Canadians) will be required to take on heavy extra costs under an equal per capita principle, which is in itself unfair. However, this issue is one of distributive justice *internal* to individual countries (such as Canada), and ought not to be addressed at a global governmental level.

Furthermore, purchasing emissions permits is not the *only* alternative besides migration for Canadians (as a collective) if they want to emit within their equal per capita limit. First, they could decrease their own fossil-based consumption, and make their energy system more efficient or even fossil free (based on, e.g., nuclear, biofuels, solar, and wind). Second, they could take some of their emissions permits that they now spend on luxuries and spend them on subsistence needs – such as heating – instead. Third, they could make sure to *offset* their emissions, for instance through tree plantation or technology transfer to developing countries. I will return to the possibility of offsetting in [section 6](#).

What is more, since most beneficiaries from climate change mitigation are poor, and since most costs for climate change mitigation will fall on the rich, emissions trading would even out some of the inequalities between the rich and the poor. Although the equal per capita view is isolationist, it is not isolationist to the extent that it does not allow for emissions trading. Once this observation is made, the intuition that isolationism is implausible for disregarding people’s different costs and benefits related to climate change withers.

5. Isolationism Disregards Issues of Causal Responsibility

People in different countries have played different causal roles in the creation of climate change. Some objectors, for instance Roser and Seidel (2017, p. 154–155), have argued that this is something that an emissions distribution principle should consider and that the equal per capita view fails to do so due to its isolationist stance.

The main reason for thinking that the equal per capita view should be sensitive to people's different contributions to climate change is that the question of emissions distribution has arisen *because* some people have overused the global carbon budget. Indeed, the future carbon budget is determined partly by people's past emissions. So, one might think, the size of people's future emissions permits should be influenced by the extent to which they have contributed to climate change.

However, this objection seems to conflate two different questions of justice in relation to climate change: one *distributive* question regarding how the greenhouse gas absorptive capacity of the atmosphere should be divided, and one *corrective* question regarding how the reparation costs for dealing with the effects of climate change should be divided. While the question of distributive justice is *non-conditional* in the sense that it concerns divisions of some initially available goods, the question of corrective justice is *conditional* in the sense that it concerns divisions of costs that stem from some previous activity (Vallentyne 2007, p. 549).

With this distinction in mind, it becomes clear that the equal per capita view is a principle of distributive justice: It is only designed to answer the question of what is the fair distribution of the atmosphere's absorptive capacity. It is *not* designed to answer the question of what is the fair distribution of the costs for dealing with the problems that are due to an overuse of this capacity. The fact that people have contributed to different extents to climate change is relevant only to the question of corrective climate justice (see Vanderheiden 2008, Risse 2008).

Of course, *if* the equal per capita view were supposed to deal also with corrective climate justice, *then* its recommendation would be implausible. For, an equal per capita division of the climate costs would imply that poor people, who have in general not contributed to climate change, would have to pay for the climate costs caused by rich people. And this would be just as implausible as, for instance, allocating punishments equally among a state's citizens irrespective of whether or not they had committed any crimes. But, again, the equal per capita view is *not* a corrective principle. This undermines the objection that it is implausible for disregarding issues of causal responsibility for climate change.

Still, one might think that the answers to questions of corrective justice *influence* the answers to questions of distributive justice, and that a distribution of emissions, permits should therefore take into consideration

the fact that people have played different causal roles in the creation of climate change. This seems to be what Roser and Seidel are after. They make a comparison with a lake that can cope with a limited number of bathing sessions per year, and the distribution of bathing permits to the townspeople. They say:

[T]here may have been differences in how the lake was used in the past that are relevant for allocating bathing rights. The fact that, on average, the lake can cope with “only” 2,000 bathing sessions per year may be a result of the fact that owners of the surrounding mansions regularly discharged their waste water into the lake, leading to an increase in phosphate concentrations. Should these individuals also receive the same usage rights as the townspeople who directed their waste water into the town’s septic tank? It would instead seem more just that the mansion dwellers should accept a small “deduction” [...] for their past use of the lake. (2017, p. 154)

For the ‘lake case’ to be analogous to the climate case, however the relevant currency would have to be amounts of phosphate emissions rather than number of bathing sessions. And with that in place, the counterintuitive implication can be produced only with a history-*insensitive* version of the equal per capita view. As was argued in [section 3](#), the history-sensitive version is more plausible, and such a version implies that those who have emitted more phosphate/greenhouse gas in the past, and thus contributed more than others to the lake/climate problem, shall receive fewer emissions permits for the future. In the lake case, the mansion dwellers have in fact already consumed some of their per capita share – which those who directed their wastewater into the town’s septic tank have not.

This suggests that the intuition that underlies the objection at issue – i.e., that isolationism disregards issues related to causal responsibility – is already captured by the history-sensitive version of the equal per capita view. Taking people’s different causal contributions into account once again would be double-counting. Consequently, neither isolationism nor the equal per capita view is vulnerable to the objection from causal responsibility.

6. Isolationism Makes the Equal per Capita View Politically Unfeasible⁷

Some have argued that isolationism makes the equal per capita view politically unfeasible. Caney, for instance, argues that ‘[d]eveloping countries, in particular the so-called BASIC bloc (which comprises Brazil, South Africa, India, and China), are deeply opposed to an Isolationist approach. They argue that an equitable distribution of greenhouse gas emissions must take into account different countries’ needs’ (2012, p. 278–9). The idea is that developing nations will never agree to a climate treaty along the lines of the

equal per capita view – especially since the equal per capita view treats emissions in isolation from other distributive issues.

As we saw in [section 3](#), a history-sensitive version of the equal per capita view manages to take people's different needs into consideration. For this reason, Caney's observation does not constitute an argument against the political feasibility of the equal per capita view. In connection to this, Posner and Weisbach raise a relevant question:

States have not so far shown any inclination to negotiate a multilateral foreign aid treaty. What reason is there to believe that they would be willing to do so in connection with a climate treaty? [...] Certainly, there is no ethical requirement to combine a climate treaty and a foreign aid treaty into one document. (2010, p. 86)

It seems that solving the problem of emissions distributions is easier when considered in isolation than when considered in conjunction with several other problems. The political community will, plausibly, have an easier time agreeing on one thing at a time than agreeing on all of them at once. Indeed, when deciding how to distribute emissions permits, it would be an overwhelming task for COP negotiators if they had to take into account *all* considerations of justice.⁸ If the emissions permits were to be distributed in an integrationist manner (taking into consideration other issues of justice), then different countries would most likely have different opinions regarding *which* such considerations are relevant and *how much* they weigh in comparison to each other and in relation to the distribution of emissions' permits.

Nevertheless, Margalioth and Rudich argue against the equal per capita view's political feasibility from the other way around: That it will be rejected by *rich* nations. They say:

The equal per-capita principle would require developed countries to transfer hundreds of billions of dollars, possibly much more, to developing countries, compared to the status quo, because developed countries generally emit, on a per-capita basis, much more than developing countries do. Unfortunately, wealthy countries such as the United States and Western European countries have looming budget deficits and an uncertain economic future; hence, requesting such amounts would doom the negotiations to failure. (2013, p. 194)⁹

I have two responses to this argument. First, as was argued in [section 4](#), it is not the case that the equal per capita view requires high-emitting nations to transfer any money to low emitting nations. It only requires that each nation stick to what is consistent with an equal per capita share of emissions' permits. *One* way to do so is to purchase emissions permits from poor countries, but another way would be for rich countries to develop their *own* infrastructures so that they become more or less carbon free – e.g.

through investing in domestic non-fossil-based energy. Yet another alternative would be for developed countries to transfer new technology to developing countries as a means of emissions offsetting. Thereby, a rich country could discount its own emissions in correspondence to the emissions it helps other nations to reduce.

It may seem counterintuitive that countries which export a lot of clean technologies are thereby entitled to more emissions themselves. Moreover, it is not clear how to account for the value of technology transfer in terms of emission budgets. Note, though, that technology transfer – or any other means of emissions offsetting – must be *additional* in order to count. This means that the emissions reductions that one country undertakes as an effect of a technology transfer from another country can count as offsetting only to the extent the receiving country would not otherwise have conducted that emissions reduction. This also requires that the technology is transferred with less or no cost for the receiving country, since if the receiving country would have paid the full cost for it themselves, then it would not count as offsetting on part of the selling country.

In the present political context, moreover, offsetting is considered as an acceptable means to decrease (or even neutralize) emissions, and technology transfer (in the sense of installing solar panels, clean energy stoves, wind turbines, etc.) is considered as one acceptable way of offsetting. Hence, the equal per capita view will allow rich countries to undertake such means in order to stick to their allocated emissions budgets and so it will *not* force them to transfer hundreds of billions of dollars to poor countries. Consequently, the equal per capita view cannot be argued to be politically unfeasible on such a ground.

My second response to this objection is that the equal per capita view is at the moment a popular principle for the distribution of emissions permits. In Caney's words, it is a 'widely held' and 'perhaps, the dominant view among environmental philosophers and activists' (2012, p. 259–60). The equal per capita view also seems to be the *least bad* alternative from the view of political feasibility. A principle that is more biased in favor of rich nations (such as the Grandfathering view) is even more likely to be rejected by poor nations, while a principle that is more biased in favor of poor countries (such as the Subsistence view) is even more likely to be rejected by rich nations. In that sense, Singer seems to be right that the equal per capita view comes out as a winner 'because of its simplicity, hence its suitability as a political compromise' (2010, p. 194). As Singer furthermore argues, the equal per capita view seems at the very least to be 'a fair starting point' (2010, p. 191). Again, this highlights the political implications of the climate ethics debate.

It could, however, be questioned whether this political feasibility debate is at all relevant as to which approach (i.e., isolationism or integrationism) is most plausible. In general, we do not think that the fact that it would be

complex or costly to apply some principle shows that that principle is false. Yet, it is a common thought in moral philosophy that the degree to which a normative principle is plausible depends not only on theoretical matters (regarding, e.g., fairness) but also on practical matters (regarding, e.g., political feasibility) (see, e.g., Timmons 2012, p. 12–16). The debate regarding distribution principles for emissions permits centers around two related adequacy conditions: one about *desirability*, the other about *achievability*.¹⁰ If it can be shown that some principles fare worse with respect to achievability, then this at least speaks against those principles. As this implies, it is not only the case that the ethical debate concerning the principles for emissions distributions is of importance for the understanding of the political dimensions of international climate policies – it is also the case that the reality of environmental politics has implications for this ethical debate.

Relatedly, there is another more general defense of isolationism – which applies to several of the previous arguments as well. This general defense points out that the equal per capita view is not the one and only distribution principle. Obviously, there are other principles governing other policy domains, just as there are other principles for different climate-related issues. For instance, a *polluter pays principle* is often argued to be the most plausible corrective principle for dividing the costs for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

As this entails, the equal per capita view is a *local* rather than a *global* principle: It is not supposed to provide solutions to all the world's problems; it is only supposed to provide recommendations for how to distribute emissions permits. For precisely this reason, the equal per capita view should be considered as *one* principle among *other* principles that deal with issues *different* from those regarding distributions of emissions permits. It is thus also open to the possibility of an overarching *rectification principle* whose purpose is to rectify misfortunes or inequalities that remain after all the local principles have been appropriately applied. This could be instantiated by a redistributive tax system, on top of the other distributive systems, whose aim would be to make sure that people would at the end of the day enjoy equal opportunities for wellbeing (or whatever other currency of justice we find relevant).

So, although the equal per capita view is isolationist, it is not isolationist to the extreme extent that it excludes the possibility of supplementary principles governing other domains than that regarding distributions of emissions permits. Once this is realized, it becomes clear that isolationism does not *per se* make the equal per capita view politically unfeasible.

7. Conclusion

I have responded to five objections levelled against isolationism and the equal per capita view: (i) Isolationism disregards that emissions permits are

substitutable; (ii) Isolationism disregards that people have different needs; (iii) Isolationism disregards that people get different benefits from, and costs for, mitigating climate change; (iv) Isolationism disregards that people bear different causal responsibilities for climate change; and (v) Isolationism makes the equal per capita view politically unfeasible.

Several of my answers to these objections depend on empirical matters. But, so do the objections against isolationism in the first place. As I have argued, it is far from obvious that isolationism makes an obstacle for the equal per capita view. Although I have not provided any conclusive arguments that the equal per capita view is more plausible than its rivals, I have argued that the objections raised against isolationism do not manage to establish that it is implausible. Hence, both isolationism and the equal per capita view should be considered as potential guiding principles in the politics of climate change.

Notes

1. This view is sometimes also called ‘Emissions Egalitarianism’. See Roser and Seidel (2017), and Baatz & Ott (2017).
2. See Margalioth and Rudich (2013). For a defense of the Grandfathering view, see Bovens (2011). For a defense of the Subsistence view, see Shue (1993).
3. Perhaps *only* subsistence emissions are non-substitutable. But, if so, this holds also for food, water and sleep, since only subsistence-levels of these goods that are non-substitutable. For a discussion about subsistence emissions and non-subsistence (or ‘luxury’) emissions, see Shue (1993).
4. Caney is aware of this (2012, p. 291, fn. 85): ‘it is a mistake to criticize the equal per capita view on the grounds that it is unfair to those with greater needs: it depends on whether they have access to narrow substitutes’. Roser and Seidel (2017), however, seem to ignore this.
5. Perhaps one might question whether a consumption-based emissions accounting, which takes into account only the consumption of present people, is history-sensitive in any interesting sense. It should be noted, however, that the consumption-based emissions accounting does not discriminate between present or past people: It holds *anyone* (past, present, or future) accountable for the emissions that are due to the production of whatever they consume. In the present context, I focus on the consumption of present people since it has interesting implications for the objection that isolationism disregards people’s different needs. Moreover, the consumption-based accounting would be history-sensitive even if it focused only on present people’s consumption, in the sense that it would attribute responsibility for historical emissions proportionally to the extent those emissions are causally tied to the production of the goods and services that present people consume.
6. In fact, the equal per capita view is supposed to be part of a so-called *cap and trade* solution to the climate problem, according to which climate stability is achieved by a three-step procedure: (i) an emissions cap for all countries together is first determined by international agreement, (ii) this emissions cap is then divided in terms of emissions permits between the individual

countries, and (iii) these emissions permits are then either used directly by each nation or sold to other nations. See Broome (2012, p. 68–69).

7. Some of the arguments in this section are drawn from Torpman (2019).
8. The COP (Conference of the Parties) is the supreme decision-making body of the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). All States that are Parties to this ‘Convention’ are represented at the COP. See: <http://unfccc.int/bodies/body/6383.php>.
9. A similar argument is given by Posner and Weisbach: ‘Per capita allocations would have the effect of redistributing hundreds of billions of dollars from wealthy nations, above all the United States, to developing nations. For this reason, insistence on per capita allocations would effectively doom any climate change agreement’ (2010, p. 122).
10. Caney, for instance, says that a principle for emissions distribution should yield a recommendation that ‘is *normatively compelling* and that *can be attained* given the state of the natural world’ (2012, p. 295, my emphases).

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