Academic Activism and the Climate Crisis: Should Scholars Protest?

Thomas Fossen

Many academics today struggle with their role in the climate and ecological crisis. Increasing numbers take to the streets to demand stronger climate measures, not just as citizens, but as scientists and scholars. How should we conceptualize and evaluate such actions? I examine the responsibilities of academics in the context of the climate and ecological crisis. I offer a defense of academic climate activism that is grounded in membership of the academic community and its special position in the climate crisis, not in the specific expertise of individual scholars. We have a responsibility, as members of the academic community, to listen to our colleagues' warnings, let their message sink in, reflect on it, and let it move us to action. Such action can take many forms, including collective action. In a context where such warnings are actively thwarted, participating in protest as an academic is not necessarily undemocratic, nor at odds with professional integrity.

Many academics today struggle with their role in the climate and ecological crisis. As the impacts of global warming become more severe, so the global political failure to address it becomes increasingly apparent (IPCC 2023; Ripple et al. 2024). For more and more academics, climate change no longer presents itself merely as an object of study but also as an existential predicament, challenging their conception of what it means to be an academic, and whether it is still worth being one. Some shift their research and teaching toward issues concerning climate and the environment, strive to make academic practices more sustainable, or direct more energy toward outreach activities (e.g., Antó et al. 2021; Burtscher et al. 2022; Chislenko 2022; Nilsen 2024; Rae et al. 2022; Urai and Kelly 2023). Others decide to leave academia altogether (Broughton 2019).

Here I examine another response: turning to political action. Recent years have seen a surge of activism by scholars, pressing governments to address the climate crisis more quickly, effectively, and justly (Oza 2023; Grossman 2024). On the pages of academic journals, in lecture halls, and on social media, calls circulate for scholars to shift "from publications to public actions" and get "out of the lab and into the streets" (Gardner et al. 2021; Abramoff 2023; Gardner and Wordley 2019). "Civil disobedience by scientists helps press for urgent climate action," a group of scholars recently argued (Capstick et al. 2022). Under the banners of Scientist Rebellion (SR) and Scientists for Extinction Rebellion, academics around the globe have engaged in collective action, from legal protests to acts of civil disobedience like pasting scientific papers on public property, blocking roads, and occupying private aviation terminals, corporate headquarters, and government buildings. Hundreds have been arrested.[1]

I will refer to such forms of collective action for climate measures by academics *as* academics as *academic climate activism.* The forms of political activism at issue here go beyond advocacy (voicing a stance on an issue, advocating a policy), and include participating in demonstrations and civil disobedience actions. Moreover, these actions are seen as an expression of one's professional role as an academic, rather than something done on the side (scholars are typically also citizens, after all). SR members wear lab coats to make this visible. While typically associated with medicine and the natural sciences, they take it to stand as a symbol for the academic community as a whole. Besides climate scientists, many social scientists and humanities scholars participate in academic climate activism. (Throughout, I use the term "scholar" to cover all academics, irrespective of discipline.)

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Is it defensible to participate in protest and civil disobedience in one's role as a scholar, to press for climate measures?[2] Even some who are sympathetic to climate activism in general have deep reservations about this. Wearing a lab coat in protest is a deliberate transgression of the widely perceived (but not uncontested) boundary between the world of academia and the world of politics and policy. On one prevalent view, the public role of scholars is to inform public debate concerning their area of expertise, not to take position within it, let alone press for change by means of collective action (Castree 2019). This is reflected, for instance, in the IPCC's mantra of being "policy-relevant," but "not prescriptive" (Mahony 2022). From this perspective, protesting as academics appears to be in tension both with our role as democratic citizens, and as professional academics. By speaking or acting *as* an academic, one sets oneself apart from fellow citizens. Some think that this violates democratic equality (Wells 2019). Others see appeals to science in protest as expressing a technocratic mindset and short-circuiting democratic debate (Hulme 2009; 2023; Evensen 2019; Kakenmaster 2019). Critics also take activism to be at odds with academic responsibility. Scholarly practices rely on virtues like impartiality, objectivity, and a commitment to truth. Activism could compromise these (van der Vossen 2015; Büntgen 2024). Finally, invoking one's professional identity in protest could affect perceptions of academia as a trustworthy institution (Donner 2017).

Yet many academics today believe that the posture of the impartial informer is no longer tenable (if it ever was): the climate crisis is an extraordinary situation that calls for an extraordinary response. Scientists have been warning for decades about global warming and environmental degradation, yet there remains a profound disconnect between the upshot of those warnings and actions taken by governments globally. The primary obstacles to effective mitigation today are political (Hagedorn et al. 2019; Glavovic, Smith, and White 2021; Stoddard et al. 2021). The scientific community has played a crucial role in revealing the problem of global warming; perhaps it now has a special responsibility in addressing it (Ripple et al. 2024). Some see a need for increased advocacy and public engagement (Keller 2011; Oreskes 2020; Thompson 2020; Green 2020). Others claim that this includes protest and civil disobedience (Gardner et al. 2021; Capstick et al. 2022; Racimo et al. 2022; Artico et al. 2023; Bhopal 2023; Lancet Planetary Health 2022).

Some academics, including many of those engaged in activism, experience a dilemma between their perceived need to act, and the traditional role-conceptions and disciplinary conventions current in (parts of) academia —and seek to redefine their role in response to it (Finnerty, Piazza, and Levine 2024). This article seeks to contribute to this critical self-examination by clarifying the reasons for action and evaluating the objections of critics.[3]

I propose an *associative* (or community-based) defense of academic climate activism, which grounds such actions in membership of the academic community and its historical role in the climate crisis. On this view, the justification of participating as academics in collective action for climate measures does not hinge on our individual expertise but stems from our ties to the academic community. It is often thought that one must be an expert on climate change to engage as an academic on climate issues. It is tempting to conclude that scholars deciphering ancient Mesopotamian clay tablets, measuring the cosmic background radiation, or interpreting the relation between Kant's three *Critiques* do not have any special responsibilities in relation to climate change in virtue of being academics. I defend the contrary view. Building on Naomi Oreskes' notion of the "scientist as sentinel", I suggest that academics have a professional responsibility to let the warnings of their colleagues sink in and move them to action. We know about and understand the nature of this crisis (insofar as we do) through science. Yet scientists' efforts to warn society about its dangers have been undermined through decades-long efforts by vested interests to discredit science and thwart effective responses to climate change. When the conditions for scientists' warnings to sink in are undermined, and part of science's public function is thwarted, this provides a basis for defending the involvement of the academic community as a whole, not just scholars working on climate change. What form of action is fitting depends on a further judgment about the circumstances and likely effects of one's actions. For this reason I do not defend the stronger claim that all academics have a *duty* to become activists. But I argue that engaging as academics in protest and civil disobedience is neither undemocratic, nor unprofessional.

This is an exercise in pragmatic, historically contextual, and non-ideal normative theorizing. The underlying assumption is that duties and responsibilities are tied to roles (in this case, of citizen and academic), those roles are tied to practices (of democracy, and of scholarship), and that our conceptions of those roles are historically variable and re-definable in the light of problems and dilemmas encountered in these practices. I refrain from appealing to ulterior moral considerations. One might think that climate change is so urgent that we have a duty to act (as humans or citizens) with "everything we've got", which overrides our professional role responsibilities. This is not my argument.[4] Instead, I argue that we have reasons to act in our capacity as scholars not in spite of our responsibilities as academics but because of them. An implication of this approach is that the associative account of academic climate activism proposed does not automatically generalize to an argument for academic activism about other issues (like, say, proliferation of nuclear weapons, social justice, responses to pandemics, or war crimes). It may be possible to develop an analogous case for (or against) action on other issues, but the details of the case and the historical context of the academic

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community's involvement need to be examined for each issue on its own terms.

Between the Ivory Tower and the Political Arena

The appropriate role of academics in society is deeply contested. We can think of this as a spectrum.[5] On one end are views of the academy as an "ivory tower." The scholar is committed first and foremost to truth, not justice. Leave politics to the politicians (van der Vossen 2015; 2020; Fish 2012; Wells 2019). Sometimes such views are underpinned by a commitment to value neutrality (Weber 1949).[6] On the other side are scholars—for example, in Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial traditions—who see their academic research and teaching as participating in struggles for justice (Haslanger 2012; Harcourt 2020). A neutral position is not available to begin with, since *un*critical scholarship contributes to maintaining the status quo. Some speak of their work as "militant research", or the "art of producing tools you can fight with" (Russell 2015, 222). From the latter point of view, defending collective action by academics would be relatively straightforward, but few will be persuaded by such an argument who do not already share its starting point. The ivory tower perspective strikes me as too far removed from the social embeddedness of academic practices and the realities of power to have much purchase in the context of the climate crisis.

I take as my point of departure an intermediate position. Within this space, a variety of views are possible, but they will be characterized by two features. First, science and scholarship are inevitably socially embedded. This means, on the one hand, that money and power contribute to shaping research agendas. On the other hand, science is not just about the world but for the sake of it (or for the sake of some significant human and non-human interests). A commitment to truth comes with commitment to other values besides epistemic ones (Oreskes 2021, 152; Douglas 2009; Kitcher 2011). As a consequence, academics have a broader responsibility, beyond discovering the truth, though this is not simply a commitment to a given political struggle. Second, we still need to recognize the distinctiveness of academic practices, dedicated to sustained critical enquiry. The responsibility of scholars is normally different from and potentially in tension with that of activists and policymakers. It is important not to confuse these roles.

In the context of climate change, such a view was recently articulated philosophically by Naomi Oreskes. To capture the "social responsibility" of the scientist, Oreskes pictures the scientist as "sentinel". The sentinel's obligation is to warn society when research identifies a problem "about which ordinary people have no other way of knowing" (Oreskes 2020, 41–42; cf. 2013). Oreskes notes that if the scientists who found out that ozone in the stratosphere was being depleted by CFC emissions had refrained from advocacy (as some of their colleagues urged), they would have neglected this duty, and as a consequence it would now have been highly dangerous to go outside. Since there is no automatic conveyor belt from scientific publications to policies, scientists need to do some of the work of bringing their findings to public attention and advocating for change. This means the scientist should get out of their comfort zone and speak up outside scholarly contexts. To stick to the seminar room and the academic journal would be to fail in one's social responsibility as a scientist, because knowledge does not disseminate itself. Importantly, though, beyond their specific area of "proximate expertise", scholars should "exercise restraint" (Oreskes 2020, 43). Presumably, this means that they should not publicly engage as scholars with issues on which they are not experts.[7]

I examine Oreskes' view in the next section. For now, two points need emphasis. First is the absence of any discussion of climate protest or other forms of collective action. She does not denounce it either. But in the absence of any consideration of it, one may suspect that she simply presumes that this would not befit the academic.[8] Second, Oreskes presents the public responsibilities of scientists as applying to individual researchers, based on their specific expertise; she does not discuss the academic community as a whole. Oreskes is not an exception. Recent calls for action aside, a blind spot for collective action characterizes much of the literature on the role of academics in the climate crisis.[9] In short, it is often thought that the public role of academics in relation to climate change is grounded in their special skills or expertise as researchers, and presumed that it stops short of protest and civil disobedience. I will challenge both points.

A Duty to Warn

In their distressing recent report on the state of the climate, William Ripple and colleagues assert that "as scientists and academics, we feel it is our moral duty and that of our institutions to alert humanity to the growing threats that we face as clearly as possible and to show leadership in addressing them." (Ripple et al. 2024, 1) This claim raises philosophical issues that they do not elaborate: what grounds such a duty? To whom does it apply: *climate* scholars and their professional associations? Or universities and the academic community more broadly? And what forms of "leadership" are called for? Issuing public statements? Decarbonizing academic practices? Or would it extend also to public protest, perhaps even civil disobedience?

If one finds plausible the general idea of a professional responsibility to warn, then the simplest way to defend academic climate activism would be to include it as one of the appropriate means of warning society. Joining climate protests would then just be one way of issuing warnings, another form of science communication. But I think we

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should resist this move. First, since it is tied to specialized expertise, it would apply at most to climate-related experts. It does not illuminate the role of the broader academic community. Second, since there is a difference between warning of a problem and demanding a particular response to it, it is not clear how the sentinel view gets us beyond advocacy to public protest and civil disobedience. Let me elaborate these points.

Oreskes' account of the scientist as sentinel offers a plausible articulation of the duty to warn. But it is underspecified in several ways. *Who* is supposed to warn *whom* of *what*, *why*, and *how*?

The scientist-as-sentinel metaphor invites us to think about the individual scientist who makes a discovery and proceeds to warn others about what they have found. But for a problem as complex, diffuse, and long-term as climate change, discovered and confirmed through the collaboration of many scholars in diverse fields and over an extended period, the relation between discovery and advocacy is less straightforward. Perhaps responsibility then falls on the research community in that particular field. Still, at most this would involve scholars with proximate expertise on the problem. Academic work is today so specialized that scholars working on unrelated topics cannot credibly claim a sentinel role—and in fact, some scientists from other fields have played a highly problematic role in climate change debates (Oreskes and Conway 2011). According to Oreskes, non-proximate academics have a responsibility to listen to those with pertinent expertise, and to defer to them (Oreskes 2020, 43). I come back to this later.

Whom should the sentinel address with their warning? Presumably, those who are affected by the danger and in a position to act on the warning. Oreskes speaks of warning "society" and "fellow citizens" (and not, say, "the authorities", "world leaders", or "the business elite"), indicating that she has a democratic society in mind. But society is not a single whole, and fellow citizens are not a uniform public. Moreover, in the case of climate change, those most immediately and most severely affected are not those best placed to act, and may in fact not, or not yet, be fellow citizens. The presence of a receptive audience therefore cannot be taken for granted.

What are sentinels to warn *of*? To warn someone is to prompt them to attend to an actual or potential threat to values or interests that they presumably share, to enable them to take appropriate action and avoid some harm (or the loss of an opportunity). So warning someone presupposes a judgment as to what their values and interests are. Identifying something as a "problem", "threat", or "danger" involves normative judgments (Moellendorf 2014, ch. 1). This also means that a warning may go against some people's perceived interests and challenge their deeply held beliefs. Oreskes acknowledges that scientists inevitably make value judgments, and argues that they should be explicit about them (Oreskes 2021, 147–59). Still, different judgments about what should be considered dangerous and whose interests count may lead to different views about when exactly the public responsibilities of scientists are triggered, as well as whether, why, and how their warning should be heeded.[10]

As to why: what grounds this obligation to begin with, and to whom it is owed? We could think about the scientist's duty to warn as an instance of a general responsibility to assist others when one perceives an immediate threat to their vital interests. Alternatively, we could think of the sentinel role as a part of the point and purpose of science as an institution, or as a compensation for receiving public funding (cf. Keller 2011, 25). Oreskes alludes to both ideas (Oreskes 2020, 41), and both are plausible, I think.

Finally, the how. What forms of action does "warning" involve? What would count as fulfilling this responsibility? And when can someone be considered duly warned? Oreskes hints at a strong interpretation of this when she enquires whether scientists should "ensure that our findings are known, understood, *and put to use* to protect our fellow citizens." (Oreskes 2020, 33, emphasis added). Effectively warning someone often requires more than just making information available. If a bridge is ascertained to be unsafe (to borrow J.S. Mill's example), then it is not enough to place a warning sign next to it; the bridge must be cordoned off, so that even the inattentive traveler will not fail to notice. But, on the other hand, it seems too demanding to say that someone is duly warned only when they are seen to heed the warning. Mill says that a person who accepts the risk and seeks to cross the bridge, with "the full use of the reflecting faculty" and cognizant of the potential consequences, may not be forcibly prevented from doing so: "no one but the person himself can judge of the sufficiency of the motive which may prompt him to incur the risk" (Mill 2011, 172–73).

I submit that what counts as duly warning someone depends on judgment of two factors: how the warning is received, and what is at stake. To let a warning sink in is to pay attention to it, consider what it means, and let those considerations move one to action—heeding the warning, or deliberately setting it aside. If one has reason to think that the warning was not heard, or was heard, but not given due consideration, then more insistence may be needed to ensure uptake. Likewise, if potential harms are severe and irreversible, and if they affect others besides the person ignoring the warning, then, too, the responsibility to warn becomes more demanding. However exactly one draws the line, the point remains that it should be possible to be warned, and yet decide, upon due consideration, *not* to heed a warning (or not in the way the sentinel recommends).

A key point that emerges from this discussion is that there is a difference between warning of a threat and determining what is to be done about it. The concept of

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warning presupposes a division of roles between sentinel and addressee. Now, advocacy is plausibly seen as a means of communicating warnings about a threat, and of recommending certain responses to it. But engaging in protests and civil disobedience actions is much harder to square with the role of the sentinel. Typically, activists make demands, ally themselves with others to demonstrate support for those demands, seek to mobilize broader support, and build up pressure to get those demands met (cf. Young 2001). Beyond raising awareness about a problem and arguing for a particular response, it seeks to directly influence the outcomes of decision-making procedures, or to contest those very procedures.

The division of labor entailed by the concept of warning thus cautions us not to conflate the role of citizen and scholar, and gives us reason not to see collective action as part of the regular arsenal of means for scientists to fulfill their social responsibility in a democratic society. But it also opens up room for another line of argument. As we've seen, Oreskes takes for granted the context of a more or less well-functioning democratic society. The analysis also suggests that to effectively warn requires a receptive audience that recognizes the sentinel *as* a sentinel and is in a position to consider and heed the warning. But what does it mean for the social responsibility of the scientist, when this cannot be taken for granted?

From Warning to Mobilizing

Instead of regarding academic climate activism as part of a duty to warn, I propose that we see it as playing a supporting role, enabling scientists to perform their sentinel role indirectly. When the social and political conditions for scientists' warnings to sink in are fraught, scientists can issue warnings, but they cannot warn effectively. Unless they mobilize support and improve those conditions, this means that they cannot fulfill their social responsibility, and part of science's public function is thwarted. This in turn provides a basis for defending the involvement of the academic community as a whole.

To develop this argument in the context of the climate crisis, let us begin by noting two features of the political history of climate change: the decades-long efforts of scientists to warn society of the dangers of global warming, and the role of vested interests in undermining effective political responses to this problem.

Scientists have been warning for decades about global warming and environmental degradation, with mixed results. In 1992, scientists published a "warning to humanity" stating that "fundamental changes are urgent," signed by 1,700 scholars (Union of Concerned Scientists 1992). It was reiterated in 2017 with more than 15,000 signatories (Ripple et al. 2017). Six assessment reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have summarized the state of climate science, each stating more insistently than the last the need for rapid and far-reaching societal transformations. The warnings have not been without effect. A global climate governance regime was developed under the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), culminating in the Paris Agreement in 2015. Globally there is broad awareness of anthropogenic climate change and widespread (if not universal) recognition that it is a problem. A climate movement has mobilized. Most governments have pledged long-term net-zero emissions targets, and some have taken policy steps in that direction (Net Zero Tracker 2023).

Yet there remains a profound disconnect between the upshot of those warnings and actions taken, such that we now find ourselves in an unequivocal global emergency (Ripple et al. 2024). Current policies fall drastically short of the structural transformations deemed necessary to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement. Global emissions continue to rise (United Nations Environment Programme 2023). Investment in fossil fuel production continues unabated despite being inconsistent with the Paris goals (Stockholm Environment Institute et al. 2023). Meanwhile, recent studies indicate that temperature rises are more dangerous than previously anticipated, with irreversible tipping points possibly already crossed at present temperature levels (Lenton et al. 2019; Armstrong McKay et al. 2022). Climate impacts today are more severe than expected, with many people and animals suffering from heatwaves, fires, floods, and droughts (IPCC 2023; Ripple et al. 2024). In light of this, it is fair to say that the UNFCCC's mission to "prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system" ("United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change" 1992) has not succeeded. Meanwhile, many other indicators of ecological vitality raise alarms and are getting worse, resulting in dramatic biodiversity loss (Díaz et al. 2019; Bradshaw et al. 2021; Richardson et al. 2023).

It is not plausible, then, to claim that scientists' warnings about global warming and environmental degradation have not been heard—but have they sunk in? Has "society" been duly warned, but did it simply choose not to heed the warnings? I do not believe that this interpretation is tenable. Through the UNFCCC governments have committed themselves to avoiding "dangerous" anthropogenic global warming, and in the Paris Accord, specified that they take this to mean keeping warming below 1.5°C, or at least "well below" 2.0°C. Thus, their failure to carry through cannot plausibly be interpreted as a collective societal decision to accept the risk and live with the consequences.

A crucial part of the reasons for the profound disconnect between warnings and actions is that the sentinel role of science has been frustrated. Multiple factors explain the global failure to effectively address the climate crisis. They include the scale and complexity of the problem, limitations of institutions at global and domestic levels, clashes of values and interests in policy-design and implementation, short-termism fostered by electoral cycles and media dynamics,

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human psychology being prone to ignoring abstract and long-term threats, pervasiveness of consumerist and growth-oriented ideologies, and the stark asymmetry between those who contribute most to the problem and those most immediately affected (Jamieson 2014, ch. 3; Stoddard et al. 2021; Hulme 2009; Levin et al. 2012).

An increasing literature points to one factor as particularly salient: the role of vested interests, such as the fossil fuel industry, in resisting acknowledgment of the problem and undermining the implementation of effective measures. The fossil fuel industry and their allies—including a number of scientists—have influenced public debate and hampered policymaking by fabricating doubt, spreading disinformation, and discrediting climate scientists, as well as lobbying insistently against climate measures (Oreskes and Conway 2011; Brulle 2021; Mann 2021; Brulle, Roberts, and Spencer 2024). These activities are referred to as "climate obstruction". Obstruction reinforces and exploits existing tendencies in political systems, which are oriented towards a short-term temporal horizon and disempower those most immediately and most severely affected, in marginalized communities, in distant parts of the globe, and in generations to come. It is clear, then, that the problem is in large part political. Drastic and rapid emission reductions, especially on the part of those responsible for the highest emissions, would be in almost everyone's long-term interest, on a broad range of conceptions of what those interests are. But it would involve upsetting and unsettling entrenched relations of power.

These observations point to the significance of the social and political conditions for the sentinel to function *as* sentinel. Just like a performer needs a stage and an audience with an unobstructed view in order to play their role, so the sentinel needs a receptive audience, willing to listen to their warning, let it sink in, and respond appropriately. This is more difficult to realize when the message is inconvenient. For those who do not directly experience droughts, fires, heatwaves, or floods, it is inherently difficult to face up to scientists' distressing warnings and to truly acknowledge the severity of the situation today. It is even more so when agents who feel their interests are threatened by climate measures trumpet contrary messages, distract public attention, and pressure decision-makers. In effect, obstruction thereby frustrates science's public role, preventing sentinels' warnings from sinking in and being effectively acted on.

This implies that the social responsibility of scientists is broader than the duty to warn (and the duty to listen) articulated by Oreskes. As Philip Kitcher has argued, the scientist also has a "responsibility to engage in sociopolitical reflection and to let that reflection inform one's actions" (Kitcher 2001, 197). This responsibility to political judgment has a narrow and a broad sense. It concerns the implications of their own areas of enquiry.[11] But it also includes a responsibility to reflect on, and, if necessary, seek to improve, the societal functioning of academic practices.

The key question, then, is this: What should a responsible sentinel do when their warnings don't appear to sink in where it matters? Should they stay at their post, monitor the situation, and keep updating their reports? Should they warn more insistently: change tone, speak more from the heart, adjust the message, and try to reach a broader audience? Or should they (in addition) try a different mode of engagement, shifting from warning to mobilizing support?

If it is true that the conditions for warnings to sink in are fraught, then more science communication and advocacy are not likely to work. Instead, what is needed is to recognize that the division of labor isn't working and strive to strengthen forces seeking to enhance responsiveness to scientists' warnings (Glavovic, Smith, and White 2021). The most obvious force countering obstructionism and shifting relations of power in favor of stronger measures is the climate movement. So a first step in this direction is publicly speaking out in support of protests movements, as thousands of scientists have done: "Their concerns are justified and supported by the best available science. The current measures for protecting the climate and biosphere are deeply inadequate" (Hagedorn et al. 2019, 139). The next step would be to actively participate in such movements (Gardner et al. 2021; Racimo et al. 2022; Capstick et al. 2022).

What I propose, then, is that we see academic climate activism not as a means of warning, but of mobilizing support for scientists' warnings to have effect. It seeks to improve the conditions for warnings to sink in and be fittingly responded to. Although the scientist-as-sentinel metaphor captures a crucial element of the social responsibility of scientists, it does not exhaust the responsibility of academics in the context of the climate crisis. Members of the wider academic community have a responsibility to strive to enable sentinels to play their role. They are crucial support actors. Sentinels need allies and amplifiers.

Why Protest *as Scholars*?

If climate scientists and ecologists today are society's sentinels, I propose that fellow academics in all disciplines are key allies. And political activism is their amplifier for challenging the status quo. But why should academics participate *as scholars* rather than just as citizens? One might accept the argument up to this point but deny that this implies any special role for academics without proximate expertise. Every scholar's area of expertise is necessarily narrow. Beyond their specialization, academics have no more qualification than anyone else. As we've seen, Oreskes says for this reason that they should be very reluctant to speak up, as scholars, beyond their proximate expertise. "[T]he obligation to speak up in our areas of expertise implies a reciprocal obligation to respect the

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expertise of others. Put another way: we have obligations both to speak and to listen." (Oreskes 2020, 43).

I agree that we should respect the limits of our expertise, and defer to colleagues in areas beyond our specialization. In many circumstances, this does limit our involvement as scholars. But I would add that what it also entails, in a context in which those colleagues warn of catastrophe, is that there is a professional responsibility to listen to their warnings, let them sink in, and let them move us to action.

To be an academic means more than just having detailed expertise on some topic. The diversity of disciplines notwithstanding, academics are part of a community with shared institutions, norms, and practices: the university, education programs, degrees, research seminars, peer review, and so on. These institutions, norms, and practices also have a common (albeit thin) set of aims. As a scholar in any field, one is part of a collective endeavor of sustained and critical enquiry about the world and ourselves, through rigorous examination of evidence and arguments. By engaging in research, one partakes in the making of a "knowledge commons", and by teaching one enables others to draw on and to contribute to these commons (Connell 2019, 32). To affirm this ideal of academia as a community engaged in a common endeavor is compatible with recognizing that in many cases, the university falls short of constituting a genuine space of collegiality and solidarity.

Research findings, then, are not the property of particular researchers or research fields but deliverances of this collective endeavor (Oreskes 2021; Collini 2012). And part of our professional responsibility is to appreciate the significance of deliverances of the practice of which we are part, also in areas beyond our proximate expertise, particularly when colleagues in the respective field collectively insist on them and call on us.

When it comes to climate change, these findings are remarkably well-established and robust (Oreskes 2004; 2021; Lynas, Houlton, and Perry 2021). They have been rigorously examined over the course of several decades by researchers from different fields. On top of normal scientific practices, they have collaborated and criticized each other through the IPCC. Today we have moved well beyond the point where a sense of alarm requires special expertise, as it did when climate change first became a major political issue in the late 1980s. You do not need to be an academic to recognize the emergency today. But science has a special role in connection with climate change, which sets the climate crisis apart from many other political struggles. Scientific understanding of how greenhouse gases in the atmosphere affect temperature levels and impact ecosystems provides the only reason we have for thinking that it is in our common interest to rapidly reduce the burning of fossil fuels. Communities currently suffering loss of lives and livelihoods because of heat, floods, drought, and habitat erosion can draw on scientific understanding to link their plight to global power structures. This is not to deny that they have other resources for understanding climate change as well, including observation of environmental changes and historical experience (Whyte 2020). But the greenhouse effect and the attribution of weather events are key pieces of the puzzle linking local environmental changes to global warming and global warming to industrial economies.

The fact that science is essential for understanding the nature of the problem gives academics a special role as a community. If scholars themselves fail to recognize sentinels in fields other than their own and take their warnings seriously, then part of the point of the scholarly enterprise is undermined.

Moreover, the need to publicly take a stand as a community is reinforced by the fact that diffusion of scientific understanding and responsiveness to it has been actively undermined through lobbying and disinformation. The efforts by the fossil fuel industry and their allies to discredit climate science and thwart its potential contribution to policy formation undermine science as an institution, contravene its basic aim of fostering understanding, and inhibit its social function. This, too, concerns the academic community as a whole.

To sum up: the activist role for the academic community in the climate crisis lies in enabling experts on climate change to fulfill their duty to warn by countering attempts to frustrate their sentinel role and helping to let their warnings sink in. What sets apart academics from other fellow citizens is not that, because we are academics, we know what needs to be done about climate change. It is rather that we have a special tie to this institution—the academic community—which has a twofold special role in the climate crisis: as both revealing the problem, and being thwarted in successfully playing its social role by actors who perceive its findings as a threat to their interests.

Is Academic Climate Activism Undemocratic?

Scholars protesting in lab coats deliberately transgress a widely perceived division of labor between academia and the democratic citizen (or activist, or policymaker). Are they thereby conflating their roles, and acting irresponsibly?

Reflecting on his own practice as an academic philosopher who has also publicly engaged throughout his career, Jürgen Habermas insists on the importance of distinguishing carefully what "hat" one wears when entering the public arena (Verovšek 2021). In his view, academics need not refrain from engaging in public, but they should be wary of any arrogant claim to special standing and any pretense to special access to the truth. One reason to think that academic activism would be in tension with one's role as a democratic citizen stems from the fact that by claiming to act *as* a scholar, for example by wearing a lab coat, one

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differentiates oneself from other citizens (including fellow protesters who are not academics). Some critics take this to be at odds with democratic equality (Wells 2019). The academic engaged in collective action lends force and credibility to a movement, draws attention to an issue, takes a stance together with other citizens, and, in the case of civil disobedience actions, goes against the apparent wishes of an electoral majority. But in a democracy, academics have no special standing to make demands. The judgment of citizens should be decisive.

On my account, however, one participates in one's professional role not because of one's special knowledge or skills, but as a member of a community whose practice has special pertinence to the problem at issue. Instead of elevating one's own judgment above that of fellow citizens, one defers to the deliverances of a communal enterprise with which one is associated, and draws attention to the political system's lack of responsiveness to those deliverances. Moreover, the objection (in this form) presupposes an otherwise level playing field, which would be disrupted by academics claiming more than their due influence. The political history of climate change calls this into question (cf. Ellis 2016). Discourse about climate change and policymaking in response to it have been systematically distorted and obstructed. In such circumstances, to draw public attention to the persistent gap between robust scientific findings and the status quo is not to disrespect fellow citizens' judgment, but rather to enable it.

Another argument for thinking that academic climate activism is undemocratic points to the contestable character of any political response to climate change. "The science" does not speak for itself. Nor does it speak with one voice. Consequently, one cannot simply say that one policy is licensed by science while another is not (Hulme 2009; 2023; Evensen 2019). To claim the mantle of science for one's position is a depoliticizing move that dismisses rather than engaging one's opponent by framing them as unscientific, thereby stifling agonistic contestation among the necessarily plural perspectives on climate change (Machin 2013; Kakenmaster 2019).

I agree that politics inevitably involves conflicting values, interests, and interpretations of problems. But the account of academic climate activism that I have given does not rely on a problematic inference from scientific facts to policies. It is useful here to distinguish between *congruence* and *responsiveness.* In this context, I take policy congruence to mean correspondence between scientific facts and policy outcomes. Congruence is a misconceived ideal. Appropriate policies cannot be directly deduced from scientific facts. In contrast, by responsiveness to scientific findings, I mean taking seriously the deliverances of scientific practices, really listening to what sentinels have to say, judging the degree of support they carry in the relevant expert communities, and taking those findings as calling for a serious response—in light of conflicting values, interest, and interpretations of the situation.

Read as a concern about lack of responsiveness, to insist that politicians and policymakers should "listen to the science" is not to say that scientists should prescribe policy, nor to deny that we can reasonably disagree about its implications. Instead, it is to object to the ways in which consideration of policy responses is presently swayed and distorted by powerful vested interests. The persistent rise in global emissions and unabated investments in fossil energy sources since climate change became a political issue in the late 1980s, and continuing after the Paris Agreement of 2015, indicate that the problem is not effectively addressed, on any credible and publicly defensible interpretation that takes the science into account. It is also deeply at odds with governments' avowed public commitments. The year-on-year heightening sense of emergency expressed by scientists makes clear that the status quo is not a livable response to the climate and ecological crisis.

This raises an important point about messaging and choosing suitable targets for protests. Academic climate activists should not disavow that they are making political judgments. Any policy response to climate change involves difficult trade-offs, conflicting values and interests, and one can reasonably disagree about these. Because science does not tell us which policies ought to be pursued, academic activists should exercise restraint in pressing for very specific policies. The more appropriate aim for scholars is to prompt a more responsive mode of engaging with the climate crisis. This does not mean that protests cannot oppose or demand specific policies, but in my view they should pick targets that can plausibly be regarded as symbolic for the wider political failure to seriously and justly address the climate crisis (like subsidies for fossil industry, new fossil infrastructure projects, and uninhibited growth in private aviation).

Disagreement is not only an inescapable feature of politics, but of scholarly practices as well. The fact of a longstanding consensus among experts on the basics of anthropogenic climate change does not guarantee that it is true (Oreskes 2004; 2021). And the sense of crisis, while broadly shared, is not unanimous.[12] Anyone making claims about deliverances of scientific enquiry needs to demonstrate broad support within the pertinent expert community for those claims. Prominent public declarations of emergency have received many thousands of signatories (Hagedorn et al. 2019; Ripple et al. 2017). In the wider academic community, there certainly are scholars who do not accept this diagnosis of climate change as a political problem (e.g., Boudry 2024). Nor does everyone share the ideal of an academic community engaged in a common endeavor. To protest in the name of the academic community is therefore also to engage in agonistic contestation over the meaning and public role

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of our scholarly practices. One may, of course, judge differently, but then one needs to offer a compelling competing account of the situation that takes those findings seriously (including findings about the history of climate obstruction).

Is Academic Climate Activism at Odds with Academic Integrity?

In December 2022, Earth scientist Rose Abramoff and climate scientist Peter Kalmus disrupted an American Geophysical Union conference, taking the stage with a banner that read "out of the lab and into the streets". Both were evicted from the conference, and Abramoff was subsequently fired by her employer, Oak Ridge National Laboratory. As she reports:

> Oak Ridge said it was forced to fire me because I misused government resources by engaging in a personal activity on a work trip and because I did not adhere to its code of business ethics and conduct. The code has points on scientific integrity, maintaining the institution's reputation and using government resources "only as authorized and appropriate and with integrity, responsibility and care." (Abramoff 2023; cf. Vidal Valero 2023)

Critics of academic activism frequently invoke considerations of academic integrity. They allege that engaging in climate activism as a scholar is at odds with one's professional role.

How, exactly, would academic climate activism compromise the integrity of the scholars involved? One reason might be that it is an abuse of one's academic status for ulterior purposes, leveraging one's credentials to further one's personal political views. However, my argument supports activists' claim that the climate crisis speaks to them in their professional role as academics. Such protests go to the heart of what academic practices are about, and thus are not an expression of merely personal views.

Another concern about integrity holds that participation in climate protests is in tension with the virtues of good scholarly practice (Büntgen 2024; but see van Eck, Messling, and Hayhoe 2024). One plausible requirement of integrity is that we do not do things that hamper our ability to be good scholars or compromise the basic values and aims of our profession. The strongest version of this argument I have seen is offered by Bas van der Vossen (2015; 2020). He draws on a vast empirical literature in psychology which shows human reasoning to be pervasively susceptible to various forms of cognitive bias. The ties of affinity and senses of identity that result from political involvement heighten our susceptibility to such biases. For this reason, Van der Vossen argues that academics (or, at least, those concerned with political issues) have a pro tanto moral duty to refrain from all political involvement—even in their capacity as citizens.[13]

It seems plausible that participation in climate protest does have psychological effects that increase cognitive bias. After all, it does generate bonds with fellow protesters and attachment to a common cause. But it is not clear that blanket political abstinence is the best response to our susceptibility to biased reasoning. Insulating oneself in the ivory tower does not immunize one against bias (Jones 2020). Given the pervasiveness of biases, also within scholarly practices, it is important in any case that we adopt strategies for coping with bias. Such strategies may then also mitigate the risk of participation in climate protest (Frazer 2023). It is the manner in which one engages in activism, or refrains from it, that is crucial when it comes to maintaining the critical, self-reflective stance that is essential also to good scholarship. Finally, even when activism does increase a risk of bias, this risk may be outweighed by other considerations. In this case, it needs to be balanced against the responsibility to enhance science's sentinel role.

In short, there is little reason to regard academic climate activism as in principle incompatible with one's role as an academic. On the contrary, as some scholar-activists suggest, it is plausibly seen as an expression of academic integrity. "Advocacy and activism need not be seen as a departure from our professional duties as academics, but rather as a natural adaptation of them to times of crisis" (Racimo et al. 2022, 5). A central aspect of integrity as a virtue, I submit, is striving for consistency between what you say and what you do, attempting to integrate beliefs and actions. To recognize the upshot of scientists' warnings and accept that we are in a biospheric emergency that is not being adequately addressed also involves reckoning with this situation somehow, letting it move one to action. To proceed as normal would be a performative contradiction. Of course, there are different ways of resolving or coping with the situation, depending on the context, one's abilities, and so on. But if one recognizes the political nature of the problem—sentinels need allies and amplifiers—then protesting as academics is a pertinent way of publicly acknowledging this sense of emergency. Strikingly, this is exactly why many academics feel compelled to engage in activism in their scholarly role: "Scientists must act on our own warnings to humanity" (Gardner and Wordley 2019).

But Will It Work?

Even if principled concerns about academic climate activism are unconvincing, one may still object for prudential reasons. The wisdom of protesting as an academic also depends on whether it works. Clearly, if participating in protest as academics were likely to undermine or frustrate the aim of addressing the climate and ecological crisis, then such participation would not be justified. I will focus only on the question of participating *as academics*, not the efficacy of climate activism more generally (Fisher, Berglund, and Davis 2023).

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The main reason adduced for thinking academic climate protest might be counterproductive concerns its effect on the perceived credibility of scholars and of science as an institution (Donner 2017; Castree 2019; Büntgen 2024). Invoking one's professional identity in protest could affect perceptions of academia as a trustworthy institution. It may also compromise the academy's ability to present itself as above the political fray and operating according to a different, apolitical logic.

Whether climate activism undermines trust in science is largely an empirical question. And the truth is, we don't really know. In a recent survey among scientists, most (strongly) disagreed (65%) that protesting for climate measures compromises credibility (Dablander et al. 2024).[14] Some studies suggest that worries about climate advocacy are often overstated, and that citizens expect scientists to engage more publicly (Kotcher et al. 2017; Cologna et al. 2021). Of course, the effects of activism may be different from advocacy (cf. Friedman 2024). Presumably, it depends on local factors, such as whether there is a credible climate movement to join up with, the degree of polarization of public debate, prevalent perceptions of science, and so on. Still, there are reasons to be optimistic about the contribution academic activists can make. In many societies, scientists are a relatively trusted group (Gundersen et al. 2022). They may be able to lend their credibility to protesters, rather than losing it, helping to mainstream climate movements, which would otherwise be represented as radical fringes.[15] On the other hand, it does not seem likely that activism helps to depolarize debate or convince groups who already distrust scientists and suspect them of having a political agenda (Alvarez, Debnath, and Ebanks 2023; Cofnas, Carl, and Woodley of Menie 2018; Socolow 2020).

However, if principled objections can be rebutted, as I have argued, this goes some way to mitigating the concern. If academic activists can defend their actions as compatible with their roles as democratic citizens as well as professional academics, this bolsters their case. It is important to bear in mind, of course, that protesters do not fully control how they are portrayed and perceived (Donner 2017).

It is crucial, furthermore, that we also consider the credibility effects of failing to stand up as a community, in the face of the heightening global emergency and the persistent political failure to effectively address it. To protest as academics for climate measures is not to politicize a domain that was previously apolitical. Neutrality is a highly problematic aspiration in this context (van Eck, Messling, and Hayhoe 2024). Climate science is inherently political because climate change touches on the vital interests of so many people (Isopp 2015). And as noted earlier, it has been politized furthermore by actors who have sought to discredit scientists to prevent or stall climate measures. Abstinence from activism does little to counteract this. If scholars stay quiet or restrict themselves to advocacy, they signal in effect that they take the division of labor between science and society to be working, and that they can live with the status quo.

In contrast, academics protesting in lab coats defy expectations and interrupt the normal course of things, precisely because this is not normally part of their role. They signal, by showing rather than just telling, that there is a breakdown of responsiveness to the deliverances of scientific inquiry. Being seen to participate sends a much stronger message than just verbally endorsing protests: it shows that you really believe what you are saying. In this respect, activism may well enhance credibility, by resolving the performative contradiction of proceeding with business as usual in the face of emergency. It also enables others to *see* the problem *as* calling for action by overcoming paralysis and exemplifying a concrete way of taking action.

Conclusion

I have examined whether academic climate activism is in principle compatible with our roles as democratic citizens and as academics, taking Oreskes' view of the scientist as sentinel as a starting point. My argument supports recent calls to action, which claim that academics have an activist role to play in the face of the climate and ecological crisis, in support and as part of the broader climate movement. If we view climate and environmental scientists as sentinels, then we have a responsibility, as fellow members of the academic community, to listen to our colleagues' warnings, let their message sink in, reflect, and let it move us to action. And the political history of climate change shows that these sentinels need allies and amplifiers to improve conditions for their warnings to sink in.

On the associative account proposed here, the justification for participating as academics in collective action for climate measures does not hinge on a scholar's individual expertise but stems from their associative ties to the academic community. If the argument is sound, principled objections to protesting as academics do not hold, and academic climate activism is compatible with our roles as scholars and citizens. It does not follow that it is always wise to engage in protest or civil disobedience. What form of action the situation calls for depends on contextual political judgment. But given the circumstances, collective action is a defensible transgression of the ordinary division of labor between science and politics in a democratic society. In light of that, it is important to recognize and publicly acknowledge that the turn to academic protest is an exceptional step, and to focus on the general state of climate and ecological emergency and on issues that symbolize the political failure to address it.

The argument proposed here applies specifically to the climate crisis, given science's special role and its recent political history. It does not automatically generalize to any worthwhile political goal. It may be possible to develop an analogous case for action on other issues, like, say,

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proliferation of nuclear weapons, but the details of the case and the historical context of the academic community's involvement need to be examined for each issue on its own terms.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

Notes

1 For example, on April 7, 2022, over 1,000 scientists across twenty-five countries engaged in civil disobedience actions, according to SR (https://scientistrebellion.org/about-us/press/over-1000-scientists-taking-action-across-the-globe/). In October 2022 in Berlin, academics disrupted the World Health Summit. And in November of that year, academics and other protesters occupied private aviation terminals around the world. In the Netherlands in 2023, hundreds of academics participated in recurring Extinction Rebellion blockades protesting fossil fuel subsidies.

2 I set aside the general question of when and why civil disobedience is justifiable. Most scholars hold that civil disobedience is justifiable under certain conditions (Delmas and Brownlee 2021). Some have defended it in the context of climate change (Pineda 2022; Schaafsma 2023). I ask, more specifically: supposing that civil disobedience is defensible, would it make sense to do so *as academics*? (Hartz 2023 offers a pertinent discussion of another form of scholarly disobedience: leaking the IPCC report.)

3 I write from the standpoint of a critical participant, not a neutral observer. After years of worrying about climate change without doing much, I have recently begun participating in demonstrations and civil disobedience actions alongside Scientist Rebellion colleagues (and other protesters). Thus far I have declined to wear a lab coat. I now think this may be overly cautious.

4 Even if one thinks that the stakes of the climate crisis trump all considerations of democratic propriety and professional integrity, there would still be the question of *how* to act. If academic activists cannot defend their actions as compatible with democracy and integrity, they will lack credibility. And if they would lack credibility, they would be very likely to be ineffective, even counterproductive.

5 Parallel discussions occur in various fields, including bioethics (Draper et al. 2019) and conservation science (Parsons 2016).

6 A more moderate view toward this side of the spectrum sees the scientist or scholar as an "honest broker" who clarifies for policymakers and stakeholders committed to different values the various options they have in light of scientific findings, while refraining from advocating any particular option (Pielke 2007; cf. Edenhofer and Kowarsch 2019, 198). However, the picture of the honest broker assumes a potential buyer who is genuinely interested and wants to have a rational discussion about the alternatives. As discussed below, this cannot be taken for granted.

7 Dennis Thompson defends a similar view. He argues that "professionals [including academics] have an ethical obligation to bear witness to climate change." As he understands it, such "witnessing" includes reporting, warning, criticizing, and lobbying (Thompson 2020, 67). At the same time, Thompson warns against various "temptations" that could compromise professional integrity. Among other considerations, "they must temper their witnessing with appropriate deference to the specialized knowledge that is the basis of their professional authority" (Thompson 2020, 76).

8 Oreskes does note, without elaborating, that "sometimes it will be appropriate for us to stand up and be counted as both citizen and scientists, for example on matters that involve defending science, or the environment, or public health generally" (Oreskes 2020, 43). Perhaps this opens room for collective action, but she does not say so.

9 For example, Eugene Chislenko argues that "philosophers should use our characteristic skills as philosophers to combat climate change by integrating it into our teaching, research, service, and community engagement" (2022, 780). Jessica Green sees a political role for political theorists, arguing that they have a "professional responsibility to act" which includes engaging in climate politics (2020, 159). For her, however, it is a matter of doing more engaged and critical research and then communicating it in public—in other words: advocacy, but not collective action. See also note 7.

10 "We therefore do not agree about the fundamental reasons to take action, nor about the urgency with

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which we should take action. Is it because we want to maximise our economic well-being, is it because we feel anxious about a planetary catastrophe and want to take out an insurance policy, or does it stem from some deeper moral instinct that we are diminishing the quality of life of future generations if we do nothing to slow the rate of climate change now?" (Hulme 2009, 139)

11 Kitcher defends an analogous responsibility to Oreskes' duty to warn: when scientific lines of enquiry predictably generate harms to certain groups (the example he considers is genetic research), scientists have a responsibility to speak out (Kitcher 2001, 196).

12 A 2021 survey among IPCC authors found that 82% believed there was (at the time) a climate crisis (Tollefson 2021). For a less alarming interpretation, see O'Neill (2023).

13 Van der Vossen's argument has limited purchase in our case. While framed polemically as a defense of the "ivory tower" (2015) and a blanket condemnation of academic activism (2020), he limits his argument to academics researching political issues. That leaves many academic climate activists off the hook (political scientists and philosophers excepted, of course). Moreover, as he concedes, not all forms of activism are equal (2020, 253). Van der Vossen's focus is on partisan activism, as is much of the research on which he draws. But many climate movements aspire to be non-partisan, resisting affiliation to political parties. Finally, Van der Vossen does not discuss under which conditions this pro tanto duty might be outweighed.

14 There is reason for thinking that endorsement of political parties or candidates can negatively affect credibility (Lupia 2023).

15 Charlie Gardner and Claire Wordley claim that "our involvement in popular environmental movements can boost their credibility, change the tone of media reporting, and ensure all members of civil disobedience groups are well versed in climate science, ecology, and other relevant disciplines" (Gardner and Wordley 2019).

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