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**What forms of civil disobedience are morally justifiable in climate activism?**

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## **Introduction**

*Climate change is being recognised more and more as a severe crisis that needs humanity's urgent attention, but governments and companies around the world are still not doing enough to limit or reverse the damage being done to the climate (IPCC, 2023). In response, there are clear developments in climate activism, to try and get leaders to take the necessary action. While climate activism in most of its current forms is not new, certain forms of civil disobedience have become more prominent among climate change protesters (Green, 2018). As politicians struggle to deal with some of these protests and societies are divided on their tactics, it is important to examine the moral justification for different strategies and means of climate activism.*

A lot has been written already on the role of states in combatting climate change. In the broader field of political science and international relations, research has gone into what kind of action states can take that is both effective and desirable. This can include transitioning from fossil fuels to green energy, or building new international institutions that bring the international community together in fighting climate change. In the field of political philosophy, many scholars have explored what states ought to do from a moral point of view; what duties states and governments might have, what a fair distribution of burden-bearing would look like, or what states might owe each other. Climate activism is often focussed on making states take that exact course of action that is not just effective, but also morally desirable, because it is necessary to combat climate change. After all, if states do not take proper action, climate change will certainly have grave consequences for societies and individuals around the globe.

This brings about the question of – rather than again focussing on states – what right or duty individuals have to get involved in climate activism. The existing literature deals quite extensively with this question, and many philosophers seem to work with the assumption that civil disobedience in the context of climate change is different from civil disobedience protesting other unjust laws (Björnsson, 2021; Cripps, 2013; Garcia-Gibson, 2023). But climate activism can take many forms, such as filing lawsuits or holding demonstrations, and I will focus on one in particular, as it is the most controversial and requires more extensive attention: civil disobedience.

While civil disobedience in itself has been the subject of numerous theoretical debates, the academic discourse around civil disobedience in climate activism in particular seems less

diverse. There are three arguments that are mainly being made: the first is that the specific situation of climate change gives individuals not just a right to engage in climate change – or even violence – but that this is an obligation, a duty that individuals have to others or to nature (Björnsson, 2021; Broome, 2019; Caney, 2014; Cripps, 2013; Fahlquist, 2009; Garcia-Gibson, 2023). What stands out is that those philosophers who condone violence, seem to use the urgency of climate change to justify almost any form of civil disobedience, or even consider it a duty to engage in (violent) climate activism (Jensen, 2011; Jensen, McBay, & Keith, 2011; Malm, 2020). Opposite this argument, some do argue that individuals for various reasons have no obligation whatsoever to engage in climate activism (Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2018; Sinnott-Armstrong & Howarth, 2005). The final argument avoids the question of obligation and instead stress that in climate change related civil disobedience, violence can never be justified (Honderich, 2018; Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008). This is not to say no one has taken a less polarised position: Tony Milligan for instance argues that some forms of violence might be necessary in civil disobedience, and Steve Vanderheiden makes a similar case for ecotage – a term I will get back to (Milligan, 2013; Vanderheiden, 2005). However, these more nuanced points of view are not nearly explored enough.

In this paper, I examine whether these arguments hold from a moral point of view, considering the purpose and intention of civil disobedience. More to the point, I explore the relationship between civil disobedience, democracy and violence and consider what other forms of civil disobedience can be morally justifiable. How can civil disobedience remain within democratic norms, if at all? And is there any room for violence as a form of protest in a democracy? These are the exact questions that have not yet been considered in a sufficiently nuanced manner. The question I therefore seek to answer in this thesis is what forms of civil disobedience can be justified in climate activism.

This paper argues that violence or damage against private property can never be morally justified, as this does not fall within the democratic role that civil disobedience has. Only damage to climate change-related government property can be justified, if it is a form of protest rather than an attempt at vigilante justice. To build this argument, I first establish an understanding of civil disobedience and examine its relation to democratic values, as well as explore what violence means and how it might fit in democratic protests. This is then used to show that the arguments in the literature mentioned previously do not hold, and an alternative perspective is proposed that gives a more rounded argument.

## **Literature Review**

In this chapter I analyse the broad outlines of the current debates around civil disobedience, democracy and violence, and I touch upon the question if there is a duty to engage in climate activism and the concepts of ecotage and harm. While some of these may seem like rather intuitive concepts, scholars have different interpretations of all of them and so I will outline how I understand those concepts for this thesis. In addition to exploring the existing debates I will evaluate some of the arguments that are being made and consider alternative approaches to the issues they run into.

### *Civil Disobedience*

Before going into the relationship between civil disobedience, violence and democracy more deeply, it is essential to explain what I understand as civil disobedience in this paper. In contemporary political and legal philosophy, one could consider Joseph Raz and John Rawls as scholars that have been among the most influential in laying the foundations for how to think about civil disobedience.

For Rawls (1971), civil disobedience is “a public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government.” (p. 364). In his understanding, civil disobedience is a strategy to appeal to a sense of morality and justice of the majority to show certain laws or policies are unjust, even if those laws or policies are not the ones disobeyed in protest.

Raz (1979) takes an explicitly less encompassing approach in defining civil disobedience; for him, “Civil Disobedience is a politically motivated breach of law designed either to contribute directly to a change of law or of a public policy or to express one’s protest against, and dissociation from, a law or a public policy.” (p. 263). His definition is not so much about what civil disobedience looks like, but rather about the motivation and intention of actions.

Raz (1979) goes further in challenging the general assumptions often related to civil disobedience. These assumptions are that civil disobedience has to be a measure of last resort (meaning there are no alternative courses of action), need to be of a non-violent nature and cannot be covert actions (p. 269). Additionally, those who engage in civil disobedience have to accept the prosecution and punishment of them breaking the law, and need to act in order to draw attention to specific injustices and illustrate this to decision-makers and the public, rather than acting in order to force people (p. 269; Rawls, 1971).

Raz is more restrictive and argues those assumptions are unfounded, as they consider the right to civil disobedience a general right and normalise its use, while in fact civil disobedience can only be morally permissible in exceptional circumstances. In his view, civil disobedience is not something that individuals have a right to (Raz, 1979, p. 267). In liberal democracies, by default the law must guarantee enough rights for political participation to be just, which means that breaking those just laws in civil disobedience can never be permissible, unless one can rationally claim their course of action is right (1979). For example, in support of a just cause civil disobedience may be preferable over legal courses of action if it does less harm than protesting within lawful rights. The example Raz gives is that a lengthy – but legal – strike might do more harm than a one-time march that violates traffic laws by blocking highways, making the latter morally preferable (1979, p. 269). Since only democratic states can have just laws, it is irrelevant to consider non-democracies in this argument.

There have been many more highly influential scholars involved in the debate on civil disobedience, and especially Rawls builds very much on the work of Marshall Cohen, who makes an additional distinction between forms of civil disobedience. He makes the distinction between *direct* and *indirect* disobedience (which Gandhi respectively called *defensive* and *offensive* disobedience), in which direct disobedience refers to breaking the law that is being protested against, while indirect disobedience describes the breaking of laws that are not being objected to, such as traffic laws or laws of trespass, in order to protest other laws or policies that are considered immoral, unjust or otherwise wrong (Cohen, 1970, p. 109).

Of course there are still other interesting conceptualisations and understandings of civil disobedience, but those are not necessarily relevant for this thesis and so I will not consider them here. Instead, it is important to come back to the idea that individuals might have a duty to engage in climate activism, which I already briefly touched upon in the introduction. One scholar who considers this question is Francisco Garcia-Gibson (2023). He outlines that there are different principles that can serve as a reason why individuals have a duty to engage in climate activism (Garcia-Gibson, 2023). One of these principles is the idea that individuals have a duty to prevent harm from happening to others. If some form of climate activism could prevent harm from happening to others, there is a duty to engage in such activism (Caney, 2014; Cripps, 2013; Fahlquist, 2009; Garcia-Gibson, 2023).

Another principle is the no harm principle, which posits that individuals have a duty not to harm others. Garcia-Gibson suggests that simply abstaining from greenhouse gas emitting

activities is not sufficient to meet the no-harm principle (Broome, 2019; Cripps, 2013; Garcia-Gibson, 2023; Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2018; Sinnott-Armstrong & Howarth, 2005). Instead, individuals have to actively engage in climate activism to stop doing harm (Björnsson, 2021; Cripps, 2013).

Additionally, Garcia-Gibson (2023) gives two more principles, which are based on the concept of political responsibility that is put forth by Iris Young (2011), and on Rawls' principle of justice. These are a little more indirect, however, and therefore I will not explore those further here.

While these principles deal with engagement in climate activism, they do not necessarily require individuals to engage in civil disobedience. Even if most of the authors listed in the paragraph above agree that individuals have a duty to engage in climate activism – with the exception of (Kingston & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2018; Sinnott-Armstrong & Howarth, 2005) – they disagree on how demanding this duty is. The argument Cripps (2013) makes is one of the more demanding versions of the idea that individuals have a duty to engage in collective action, as she requires individuals to actively organise themselves and protest policies that enable climate change. Others have less demanding conceptions (Björnsson, 2021; Broome, 2019; Godoy, 2017). But even if for some there might not be a duty as such, all of these authors believe individuals have the right to engage in civil disobedience as a form of climate activism.

Coming back to the concept of civil disobedience, in this thesis I will largely use Rawls' conceptualisation of civil disobedience, as this is the broadest version. This means that when I use the term civil disobedience from here on, it will refer to an illegal act that is politically motivated and aimed at bringing a government to change unjust laws, rules or institutions (Rawls, 1971, p. 364). These acts have to be carried out overtly, with the perpetrators accepting the (legal) consequences of their actions to show respect for the rule of law and democratic state.

However, I will not accept that civil disobedience has to remain non-violent. As explored earlier in this chapter, Rawls argues that the aim of civil disobedience is to bring about a change in government policies or laws by drawing societal attention to a situation considered unjust, getting society to acknowledge injustice and generally putting pressure on the government to change the perceived injustice. If violence is a method of achieving just that, there is no conceptual objection why civil disobedience cannot be violent (Honderich, 2018; Zinn, 1968). This does not mean that I argue violence in general should be condoned, supported

or normalised. In the next chapter I will explore what limits or conditions there are for violence in civil disobedience to be morally acceptable and why those limits are important, but first I will consider what violence really entails.

### *Violence*

Many of the conceptions and understandings of civil disobedience discussed earlier consider the role of violence in civil disobedience. Given how prevalent the concept of violence is in the discourse around civil disobedience, it is striking how little attention is given to explicitly defining the concept of violence. This raises the question what should be understood as violence. While Rawls and Raz argue that violence can never be a part of civil disobedience and Jensen suggests that violence is a fully justifiable method of fighting injustice, neither author explains what they consider violence. Like seemingly every other scholar, the assumption is that violence is a self-explanatory concept that does not need defining. I propose it is anything but evident.

Intuitively, certain actions are very clearly violent: hitting another person, kicking a dog or throwing a stone at a police officer are clear cases of violence. But what about cutting down a tree? Or blowing up an oil pipeline, or throwing a wine glass on the floor to shatter it? To some these are all cases of violence, or maybe just some of them and to others none of these are examples of violence at all. The underlying uncertainty is if violence can only be directed to humans or sentient beings, or if it should include all living organisms. What about dead or inanimate entities? Both a pipeline and a rock are inanimate, but one is man-made to serve as a means to an end, while the other is not. And does violence even have to be physical, or could shouting insults at someone also be considered violent action?

Most of the authors that have been mentioned so far and deal with some conception of violence seemingly imply similar notions of violence, even if they do not talk about it explicitly. However, they jump right into justifying or invalidating the use of violence, without it being clear where they draw the line of what they consider violence. I believe this to be problematic and limiting to the applicability of their arguments. Yet, the broad outlines of their understanding of violence are clear enough and serve as a good enough foundation to provide an actual definition. For this paper, I propose violence as a broad concept, which I consider “a(n) (attempted) infliction of direct harm to an entity”. This definition moves the conceptual unclarity to what is to be understood as “harm”. Although this is a topic of extensive debate in

its own right, I will not go into it any further than explaining what I consider harm. For the argument in this thesis, harm is any effect that makes (the integrity) an entity worse off than it would have been without this effect. Additionally, I will assume that anything can be experience harm, even if it has no clear interests. These two definitions together form an abstract and vague idea, but it is the only way to properly express the scope of what violence really can include, so I will break it down in parts.

The first clarification I should give is about what constitutes an entity in these definitions. An entity can be physical or non-physical. While physical entities are probably rather self-explanatory, non-physical entities are not nearly as straight-forward. Probably the best examples of non-physical entities are ideas, norms and institutions, but in this case definitely also companies or communities.

Another aspect is “the integrity of an entity”. The integrity of an entity is again quite intuitive, being about remaining intact, as opposed to being broken, damaged, destroyed or killed. Perhaps less evident is how an entity can be worse off in another way. But take a fossil-fuel powerplant, or even a pipeline as an example: protesters can occupy a powerplant, or close the valves of a pipeline. No physical damage is being done to their integrity, but their functioning is being hampered, which my definition thus includes in the term harm.

A third important aspect of the definition of violence is the inclusion of “direct harm”. An – at least in the Netherlands – often talked about aspect of climate activism is the blocking of highways to protest against the fossil fuel industry, and how this harms individuals who for example need the highway to get to work. By distinguishing between direct and indirect harm, it is possible to precisely indicate in what way such a protest is an act of violence. It is an act of direct violence against the highway, as this is the entity that is being obstructed in its functioning. However, it is not an act of violence against the individuals who are undoubtedly harmed, as this harm is inflicted indirectly.

Finally, we should consider how the successfulness of an attempt and its intentionality at violence plays into the story. Say I try to throw a rock at a police officer, but he manages to dive away and avoid being hit. Does that mean I did not commit an act of violence? I think most people would agree that the police officer avoiding my rock changes anything about my action. Likewise, if I throw a stone not intending to harm anyone but accidentally break a window, does the absence of bad intentions excuse the result of my actions? The key here is if I should have been able to foresee that my actions could inflict damage. This last point is quite crucial, as there are some important implications that come with it. If I can be unintentionally violent,

this means that causing a wildfire by carelessly smoking in a dry forest can be considered violence against nature, and it might even go as far as suggesting emitting greenhouse gases by getting in my car is violence against the earth's climate. This draws back to the idea explored under *Civil disobedience*, that individuals can only fulfil the no harm principle by actively fighting climate change, as everyone already inflicts harm by emitting any greenhouse gas.

This should solve the definitional problem of how to understand violence, but there is another problem: a justification problem. Intuitively, violence and harm might have a negative connotation, suggesting they are inherently “wrong” or unjust. But violence is not by definition unjustifiable. In the case of self-defence for example, violence can be perfectly justifiable. So the question becomes what forms of violence, and under what circumstances, can be acceptable. This involves the distinction between wrongful and rightful harm. I explore these questions in the next chapter.

### **Morally justifiable forms of civil disobedience**

Before moving to the questions of violence and wrongful harm, I want to come back to the consideration if climate activism takes a different place morally than other forms of activism. Is climate activism different from other forms of challenging unjust laws? Given the literature I have discussed before in this thesis, I would argue that the urgency, universality, scope and complexity of climate change indeed give climate activism a morally different position. This leads to yet another question: are the types of activism and civil disobedience used in climate activism that can be justified also morally different? To answer this question properly, one has to explore both what can be justified for activism in general and for climate activism in particular, which is a debate that is far from resolved. My contribution is to what can be justified for the latter.

It seems that there are two broad categories that are conceptually interesting to use to sort types of climate activism and civil disobedience. On one hand, there are non-violent forms of civil disobedience, for which there should not be any moral objection. Whether or not one accepts that individuals have a right to civil disobedience, there seems to be a general consensus it is morally acceptable under the right circumstances and that climate change is a sufficient reason to engage in civil disobedience. On the other hand, there are violent forms of civil disobedience, which require more attention. In this chapter I explore what types of climate activism count as

civil disobedience, what types of civil disobedience can be considered violent and which of these types are morally justifiable.

At the end of the previous chapter I established that violence can refer to a whole lot of different actions, and I want to consider three cases to explore if they are instances of violence, if they are examples of civil disobedience and what this means for their moral permissibility. The first happened in March of 2022, when in affluent parts of London air was being let out of the tyres of SUVs of residents in protest against their excessive fuel consumption (Horton, 2022). Even though no actual damage was done to the tyres, the fact that their proper functioning was being interfered with makes this qualify as direct violence to the cars, although there was only indirect violence against the owners.

In the same year in the Netherlands, protesters of Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion broke into Schiphol Airport's private jet area to block some private jets from taking off (NOS, 2022). While this may only seem violent because the protesters did some damage to the airport, their action of physically blocking airplanes to take off very much constitutes violence as well. And elsewhere in the country a year later, protesters occupied the grounds of a steel-processing factory called Tata Steel (NOS, 2023). The company had received a lot of negative press at the time because of reports about how polluting their factory was. So the aim of the protesters was to obstruct, until the leadership of the company agreed to take radical action to stop their pollution. This, again, is a clear case of violence within the definition that I use.

Having established that these are all examples of violence, it is important to assess if they count as civil disobedience. As drawing attention to injustices and gaining popular support to change unjust laws is the aim of civil disobedience, all forms of civil disobedience need to be directed towards governments and avoid antagonising society. This is why it involves breaking laws, and is done overtly, as that is bound to draw attention. Some protesters feel like this is a more effective strategy than simply protesting in a way that society and politicians can ignore (Pasternak, 2018). By a combination of making sure that society becomes aware and starts caring about the injustice, a (politically unacceptable) disruption to everyday life, and a consequent build-up of pressure on politics to act, those who engage in civil disobedience seek to have the laws, rules or institutions that cause injustice changed. Even according to Raz violence can in a very limited number of cases, be justified to serve that exact purpose (p. 268).

In all of the three examples that I mentioned before, one or more of these elements are absent. In the case of Tata Steel, protesters tried to force a private company to change their behaviour. But one of the fundamental aspects of a democracy is that everyone has a right to behave in any way they want that is within the confines of the law. Forcing others to act how you want them to, rather than how they would want to, is inherently undemocratic. This is the entire purpose of civil disobedience: instead of forcing others to change their behaviour, protesters try to persuade governments to make the undesirable or immoral behaviour illegal. Similarly to the Tata Steel case, in the Schiphol example protesters tried to keep individuals from doing something they have a right to do, only because in the eyes of the protesters it is immoral and should be illegal, even if it is perfectly legal.

The case in London might be somewhat more open to interpretation. One could think the actions were aiming to influence the behaviour of other individuals, by discouraging them to drive more polluting vehicles – or even physically prevent them from using such vehicles. On the other hand, it could also be argued that this is just a form of protest and meant to draw attention to a perceived injustice, which in this case is the fact that some people contribute more to climate change by driving unnecessarily polluting vehicles. However, this uncertainty is enough of a reason on its own to consider it an undemocratic course of action. To remain within the scope of civil disobedience, one has to make clear what their intentions are, indicate what injustice they are protesting and then protest overtly, accepting the possible legal consequences of their actions. It is important to actively refrain from intimidating other individuals to change their behaviour.

Rather than consider these cases examples of civil disobedience, they could be considered instances of *ecotage*. Ecotage is conceptually different from civil disobedience, even though the two might look similar (Vanderheiden, 2005, p. 427, 432-433). What is the difference between the two? According to Vanderheiden, ecotage is violence against inanimate objects rather than persons, and occupies a conceptual space between civil disobedience and terrorism (2005, p. 433). The aim of ecotage is to fight the profitability of actions that are destructive to the environment (2005, p. 433). There are some important points Vanderheiden makes that are applicable to my argument in this thesis as well. One is the assertion that violence against people is never justifiable, as every individual has a right not to be harmed (Vanderheiden, 2005, p. 428). Another is that the civil disobedience and the use of force are *prima facie* objectionable, and can only be justified under certain circumstances and if no alternative means are available,

although Vanderheiden also admits that ecotage is yet more objectionable (2005, p. 432). The main important claim he makes that I disagree with, however, is that ecotage can be morally justified as well. Given its inherently undemocratic intentions, and its covert, violent and illegal methods, ecotage does not fit within the framework of morally justifiable climate activism that I propose in this thesis. One of the main assumptions in this paper is that climate activism has to remain within democratic norms and values to be morally justifiable. Exactly why remaining within the confines of democratic behaviour is so important I will explore in the next chapter, but for now I will focus on different types of violence and their moral permissibility.

If ecotage is morally unjustifiable because it does not respect democratic norms, the mere fact that it uses violence against inanimate objects is not objectionable in itself. However, I do argue there is an important distinction to be made when considering violence against objects, in the context of climate activism. This distinction is between private property and government property. There are two main reasons why damaging government property is different from damaging private property, and why it might therefore be justified. The first reason is instrumental: damaging private property will push away support from the cause one is trying to defend (Kurtz, 2020; Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008; Vanderheiden, 2005). The second reason is more legal. Private property is protected under law, and no individual has a right to interfere with others' property. People have a legal right to their property that only under exceptional circumstances a government can interfere with. However, government property does not belong to individuals, but to the community of people that a government in essence is.

There are two more conditions that are required before violent civil disobedience could be justified. The government property towards which the violence is directed has to be in some way climate change related. This builds on Rawls' idea that one should disobey the law they are protesting against, and only if that is not an option should they disobey other laws (1971). Secondly, any such violence has to be a form of protest rather than vigilante action – which is essentially the difference between civil disobedience and ecotage.

### **The role of democracy**

Throughout this thesis I argue that democracy should at all times be respected in order for climate activism to be morally justifiable. One could say this is because as soon as climate activism moves beyond the confines of democratic norms, it shifts away from civil disobedience

and towards for example ecotage. As I indicated in the previous chapter, while civil disobedience can be morally justified, ecotage cannot. But why is it so important to remain respectful of democratic norms? Why can civil disobedience be morally justified, but not ecotage because it no longer respects democracy?

There are multiple ways to think about this. On one hand, one could simply extend the original argument Rawls and Raz make for the moral justification of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience should be a means of last resort, if all other – legal – options are gone, only then should individuals engage in civil disobedience. If we take this argument further, it comes down to the following: just like individuals have to use all legal options first before resorting to illegal forms of activism, protesters have to exhaust all democratic options before turning to undemocratic ones. Whether or not the democratic options are still open I consider later in this chapter.

Another way to approach the importance of democracy is by looking at effectiveness in reaching the desired outcome. Democracy is a stabilising factor within society, and many people would feel that a threat to democracy could have very negative consequences. By explicitly respecting the rule of law, those who engage in civil disobedience attempt to retain the favour of public opinion. However, covertly using violence to exert some form of vigilante justice will push people away from a cause which they otherwise might have supported (Kurtz, 2020; Vanderheiden, 2005). This counterproductive outcome makes respecting democratic norms an essential requirement for any morally justifiable action.

As I explained before, my argument heavily relies on the assumption that climate activism has to stay respectful of democratic values. However, it makes sense to argue that democratic institutions function not well enough or too slowly to still be able to effectively combat climate change (Kurtz, 2020). The little time left, combined with how many actors are required to properly limit climate change make them believe democratic decision-making is incapable of solving such a complex problem. Additionally, this belief could be reinforced by a perceived unwillingness of certain political actors and stakeholders to take effective action, and the fact that many actors have conflicting interests that stand in the way of reaching effective agreements. This could be the basis for some possibly valid critiques of my argument.

Is my assumption that democratic norms should be respected and upheld indeed untenable? It seems that there are several possible claims being made by those who believe so. The first

option is that it takes for certain that there is too little time left to take action in a democratic fashion, but that their goals are supported by a majority of people nonetheless. Secondly, democracy might not be able to take effective action even if there were enough time, because too many people give priority to other interests. Lastly, it seems as though those who encourage violence believe it is a more effective alternative than following the democratic process. I will go over all these assumptions separately.

The first assumption I mentioned above is inherently difficult to argue for or against, if not impossible, for the mere fact that there is no way to predict how things in the future will go. However, there are precedents and similar cases in the past that one can use to make a reasonable assessment. While the Montréal Protocol deals with a significantly different – and arguably less complex – issue than the current climate change treaties about greenhouse gas emissions, it managed to get all countries to significantly reduce their emissions of substances that harmed the ozone-layer within 25 years. Another example would be the recent covid-19 pandemic and the response of governments around the world – while extremely polarising – showed that governments can be fast in implementing measures that are designed to keep people safe in the case of a crisis. In many cases, this could even be done without disabling or surpassing all relevant institutions.

The second assumption, that actors in a democracy have too little incentive and too many conflicting interests to effectively reduce harmful activity, might seem very attractive. However, there are several ways to overcome this problem. One way is to change the discourse around climate change action. Currently, climate change is being used as a political tool, and many of the discourse focusses on what I would call “negative” measures. Negative measures in this case are things individuals should stop doing or do less, or things that would no longer be possible, as opposed to “positive” measures such as things people should do instead, or new opportunities that arise.

Another is to get societies to a point where a democratic majority pressures their government into taking significant action to tackle climate change. This may not be a straightforward solution, but if one accepts that democracies are ultimately responsive to popular opinion on salient topics then gaining enough support for climate action within a society will get governments to take such action.

Popular support for climate change measures is not only helpful, it is essential. However, experience has shown that it is not as easy to get societies behind the project of shifting to a more sustainable way of life as one might think, considering the scientific consensus that such a shift is necessary. At the same time, losing popular support can happen rather quickly, and violence is actually one of the ways popular support for climate change action can decline (Kurtz, 2020; Vanderheiden, 2005). The exception to this is if there is agreement that the violence is justifiable, or even necessary, which is where the main argument I make in this thesis comes back in again. For violence to be justifiable, it cannot be excessive and has to be specifically targeted to avoid harming people.

Building on this idea that the urgency of climate change means there is not enough time to do things democratically, one could argue that the gravity of the consequences of climate change give people different rights. This would be a critique of my thesis based on the premise of self-defence. The self-defence argument is significantly different from the time-constraint argument, even though they might seem similar on the surface. However, while the time-constraint critique proposes democracy could be surpassed because the outcome would be similar in case democratic processes were followed if there were enough time, the self-defence critique assumes that the right to well-being and security of individuals is covered in democratic values. These values allow for violence to be used as self-defence. The argument is that climate change is such an existential threat – at least to some individuals, if not all – that these individuals have a right to use violence to protect themselves, in the same way one is allowed to harm another person that is trying to kill them.

There are two main assumptions in this argument: the first is that climate change poses such an existential threat that it gives people the right to use violence to protect themselves, and the second is that violence in this case actually constitutes a form of self-defence. The first assumption is difficult to use properly as an argument. No one should deny that climate change is a grave and urgent threat that already endangers many individuals and will only get worse and affect more people. But where do you draw the line where it becomes a matter of actual self-defence, and to what extent can you hold other individuals accountable for their contribution to climate change? This is a whole other philosophical discussion that I cannot and will not get into now. Instead, I challenge the assumption that violence constitutes an effective form of self-defence in this particular instance. First of all, this argument risks leading to a slippery slope, as violence leads to more violence (Mittiga, 2022). Additionally, unless there is

a general consensus within a society that this form of violence constitutes self-defence, it will have the same alienating effect on those who do not condone violence as I explored before.

A final critique of the argument I have made in this thesis could be that in practice there is no way to tell the distinction between violence that is intended to be a protest or violence that is ecotage or some other form of vigilante action. In fact, one could argue that the two are not mutually exclusive and will very often overlap. My first response to that might be side-stepping the issue, but the argument I have tried to make in this thesis was never about providing a framework for assessing the behaviour of individuals and assigning a moral assessment to their actions. The main intention of my argument is to provide an alternative way to think about the role of violence within civil disobedience and democratic processes. Everyone is only in charge of their own actions and I do not believe it is up to anyone to judge whether the actions of others are morally justifiable.

Getting to the point that is actually being made, however, the challenge of violence as protest and as vigilante action being intertwined should be taken seriously. Say someone wants to drill a hole in a government-owned oil pipeline to draw attention to its injustice, because it contributes to climate change. Since drilling a hole is obviously violence, intentionally causing both physical damage and disrupting the functioning of the pipeline, this individual does everything outlined in this thesis to stay within the confines of democracy and only act morally justifiably. They make their action as overtly as they can, making sure there is enough media attention, being clear about their desire that the political leadership should stop using the oil pipeline to lessen pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. If the individual is arrested, they accept the penalty for their offense. Additionally, if the pipeline goes out of order for some time it will not endanger energy supplies to anyone. All of this should mean that their action is perfectly justifiable. But what if at the same time, the individual is also glad that the oil pipeline cannot be used for some time while repairs are being carried out? Or if that was even part of his goal to begin with?

As I said before, this is a valid critique of my thesis and should not be disregarded carelessly. However, I do believe that intent is critical here, even if there is no way for anyone to ever know for sure what someone's true intentions would have been. It is up to any individual to judge their own action for moral value. If one knows that they drill the hole in the pipeline mainly to protest against its existence but want the government to decide to permanently stop

using it, rather than trying to decide on behalf of the government to stop the pipeline from being used any longer, then their action is morally justifiable. The mere fact that it has a positive side-effect does not alter this. Additionally, does the fact that others cannot know for sure make one's actions not morally justifiable anymore? I think that is an unrealistic condition to put on any assessment of morality.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I want to stress again that I am not at all encouraging anyone to use violent means to protest against climate change. One of the aims of this thesis is to show that there is a middle ground in the debate whether or not violence can be a legitimate form of protest in climate activism, and I argue that this middle ground can be found in a set of justifications and conditions. While violence against other individuals is never justified because everyone has a right to (bodily) integrity, violence against property might be justified if it is government property. In a democracy, everyone is protected from interference with their property from other individuals, but violence against government property can count as civil disobedience. While this is as illegal as violence against private property, it is morally acceptable if it is done as a form of protest – and private property is not a legitimate target for civil disobedience or protest.

Beyond just looking at violence, I argue in this paper that other forms of civil disobedience, such as breaking traffic laws, are also morally justifiable in the context of climate activism. As climate change is a topic of injustice that differs from other injustices because of its urgency, the scale and the complexity of the issue, more can be justified in climate protests. The key determinant in this case is if acts of civil disobedience do wrongful harm. I argue that while blocking a highway certainly does harm to what I refer to as innocent bystanders, this harm is not wrongful because of the gravity of the injustice such an action is protesting against. This is in line with what many others argue as well.

There are, however, some limitations to my research and the argument that I make. One of the more important topics that I skip over is violence against people. Every person has a right to bodily integrity, but there are instances in which this right is not absolute. Most, if not all, democracies allow individuals to do serious harm to others if their own safety is at risk because of those others. I briefly address the concept of self-defence in the previous chapter, as well as the idea that climate change can be such a serious threat to the safety and well-being of

individuals that it could justify violently forcing a government to act against climate change. This I dispute, by reiterating the importance of respecting democratic norms when engaging in civil disobedience. But one can also argue that violence against those who cause or contribute to climate change is morally – and by extension, legally – acceptable as a form of self-defence. This is a complex and highly controversial idea, which I cannot properly explore in this thesis. To evaluate this argument, a clear framework on how to assess blame and accountability for climate change is needed first, as well as an indication of the necessity of the use of violence to defend oneself against harm.

Another, similar but distinct, limitation of my research is about violence against private property. I state that because democracies protect individuals' property rights, no person has the right to interfere with such property to protest against climate change. There are two ways in which this might cut corners; one could make a similar argument based on self-defence as in the previous paragraph, or one could challenge the assumption that even in the context of climate change this democratic norm of not violating private property should be upheld.

An argument based on self-defence would posit that the functioning or existence of a certain object or entity is a threat to the safety or well being of individuals and therefore those individuals have a moral (and possibly legal) right to commit violence against it. This might be easier to defend than the self-defence against humans argument in the previous paragraph, but still requires such a worked-out conceptualisation of causality that I cannot get into it in this thesis.

The other possible challenge, that violating private property becomes acceptable in the specific circumstances of climate change, would require a rather extensive philosophical substantiation. For such a challenge to be successful, one has to convincingly show that climate change has become so urgent and threatening that any possible benefits of violating democratic norms outweigh the negative consequences. Specifically, any such argument would need to prove that there is a reason to believe that climate change will be more effectively dealt with if private property is violated by individuals, and under what conditions this would occur.

Additionally, this thesis has to be limited in scope to make a convincing argument and consequently leaves out many interesting aspects that could be and should be explored further. Perhaps the most obvious limitation in scope is that I only look at individuals in democracies. While a lot of the most polluting states are in fact democratic, some major polluters are not and climate activism therefore has an inherently different character. It would be unwise to assume

individuals living in non-democracies have the same moral rights and obligations as those who live in democratic states. Civil disobedience necessarily takes significantly different forms in a non-democratic setting, and this will have a profound effect on what is morally justifiable. Exploring this properly is important to get a more complete picture of what individuals in general should or should not do to play their part in fighting climate change.

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