Moral Courage, Environmental Style
Conversation Between Rachel Fredericks and Nora Mills Boyd (Transcript)
July 30, 2024

NORA

Alright. Hi, everybody. I'm Nora Mills Boyd, and I'm here with Rachel Fredericks, and we're here to talk about Rachel's paper, "Courage as Environmental Virtue."

And this video is going to be posted with some other resources related to environmental courage as a moral virtue on the Philosophers for Sustainability website with some other resources, including a short video that Rachel made introducing the main arguments of the paper that we're going to be talking about. So hi, Rachel.

RACHEL

Hi, Nora, and everybody.

NORA

So I wanted to thank you so much for agreeing to speak to me about this paper. I really appreciate it.

RACHEL

No, thank you.

NORA

I wanted to start out by asking you about the contrast between the virtue you're talking about and another problem that I think might be relevant to some of the situations that you're considering. So your view of environmental courage allows that courage can be demonstrated in the face of both physical and non-physical dangers. So on the one hand, you have pipeline protesters who you say, "like all others who come into direct confrontation with the police in America, face potential physical dangers." On the other hand, you discuss the case of a suburban homeowner who "defies social norms and forgoes a lush lawn in favor of a more ecologically appropriate one." And you suggest that the latter involves less courage, although it could still count as environmental moral courage, because drawing on Pianalto, you discuss the possibility of social death as a consequence of courageous action, which I take it would be maybe worse than the ostracization of the lawn-foregoing suburbanite, but even if it doesn't involve physical harm. So you think that fear of these sorts of dangers is largely what is preventing, I take it that you think fear of these sorts of dangers is a significant part of what is preventing environmental action in America.

RACHEL

Sometimes, yeah.

NORA

I wonder how much, is this a small amount of cases or is it just that we're largely lazy or we're, we don't really care as much as we say we care on, you know, surveys about environmental concern. So how big a role do you think this lack of courage is actually playing in environmental inaction?

RACHEL

Yeah, great. Okay, first, thanks for bringing up these surveys where people say that they're really concerned about the environment or climate change or other things too. And then when you look at their actions, or you even just ask them about their actions, they really aren't acting on these things that they often say they're really, really concerned about.

So these are statistics that, and like patterns that I just returned to over and over again, because I'm like trying to make sense of them, trying to see them in my own life, trying to figure out what to do in the face of them. I definitely don't have all the answers, but laziness is just not my go-to explanation for anything. I know other people disagree with me on that, but there are a lot of reasons.

One I want to focus on here is that if we say the problem is laziness, we're saying that the problem pretty much just resides inside certain individuals. But when it comes to climate inaction and the other sorts of big problems that I care about, what I think we need is generally a systems analysis. Now, fear, whether it's like fear of social death or fear of something else, that's another thing that's inside certain individuals. And I do think fear is a problem and maybe even a major problem. But what we need to do is look at the systems that put people in situations where fear is a reasonable response. People fear and risk social death in certain situations and not in others. And that's because society treats some behaviors as worthy of social death and not other behaviors. Society could change.

So all of this is to say that I think political and economic systems and social institutions are really the major culprits. They enable people with disproportionate money and power to make it seem super, super hard to do what needs to be done. And at least when it comes to climate solutions, we have so many proven technologies that are getting cheaper every day. And there are so many behavioral changes that people could make much more easily if we changed infrastructure and economic incentives and other policies, social practices.

And like, sure, there's going to be costs and risks in making these changes. And if individual people fear them, I just don't think we should really point any fingers or blame people because I think they're right that those costs and risks exist. At the same time, the costs of the status quo are astronomical. So not just in terms of the astronomical costs of looming environmental collapse, but also in terms of our own integrity. It's just so alienating to care about something deeply and then not translate that care into action. And that's why I returned to those statistics over and over and over again.

I just think it's so interesting and important.

NORA

Yeah. I mean, maybe I'm reflecting on my own experience too, and maybe this would be helpful for listeners as well, that I feel like I sometimes just forget the things that I could be doing that are actually relatively nearby at hand that maybe actually don't require a lot of courage or don't even require me to jump over big obstacles. It's just that I sort of get caught up in the flow of my day and forget that this is something that I care about, or even what the options are.

So maybe it's just helpful to say, what's your favorite laundry list of things that we could be doing? Or what are some of the things that you're super proud of that you have done—just to remind ourselves what we could be doing?

RACHEL

Yeah. I mean, I think this is probably going to be a theme in the other things we talk about today, is just that there are so many ways to do pro-environmental stuff that may or may not involve courage. Not all of them require that, obviously. There's just so many ways.

But again, to go back to the systems thing, your observation about how easy it is to get caught up in the flow of day-to-day life. You know, I think that's going to be a reflection that resonates with a lot of people. I mean, I think a lot of us have caught ourselves in that kind of thing. So that strikes me as completely normal, and also expected. Because in many ways, our society is set up to make that happen, right? Um, like stay in your lane, do things the way others around you are doing them, even if it's not working for you, or if it's not working in general. I just think that, you know, we live in these really complex societies and for a whole lot of reasons, they're set up to stay the same. So no surprise.

NORA

Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. Yeah, okay. Well, now I'm thinking about, okay, what would the things be that would really require, you know, maybe kind of deep moral environmental courage that maybe involved physical danger. And there are those options too. And we don't, you're right, we don't set our lives up unless we're in radical activist circles to, you know, set aside big chunks of our week to talk about these options and how we might get involved with them and what, you know, what consequences we might face if we do get involved with them. Yeah, our social lives are largely set up so that we don't give ourselves that time to even consider the possibilities, right?

Okay, I wanted to ask you...so one feature of this account that you give us, drawing on Pianalto is that to have genuinely *moral* courage or moral environmental courage in your case, it has to be that, you know, what we're doing doesn't just steamroll over other human beings that we have to, in the process of, you know, going after our aims and exercising, expressing this virtue, we have to treat others as persons and not merely as objects. And I was really struck by one of the cases that you discussed because it sort of sent me thinking about all of the downstream cascading effects of all of our actions and the ways that our

lives are so intertwined and the possible ramifications of some of these actions we might consider when we're trying to be morally environmentally courageous.

So you were talking about the example of pipeline protesters and you consider whether the protesters meet this demand of environmental moral courage to treat other humans, particularly you talk about those who rely on oil pipelines for their livelihoods or who depend on the energy made possible by those pipelines to live a minimally decent life in morally appropriate ways. So, you know, could, could you take an action against an oil pipeline, maybe to destroy one or to prevent the building of an oil pipeline, and could you treat, could you still treat these people who rely on that pipeline for their livelihoods or who rely on the energy transferred for a minimally decent life [as persons]?

And you say, you know, okay, this is a difficult matter. And you write, "All I can do here is suggest that if the protestors robustly and actively support the development of cleaner sources of energy, support the affordable provision of adequate energy to sustain minimally decent lives, support job retraining programs for those who make their living from the oil industry, and so on, then they can be seen as treating all relevant parties as persons while carrying out their activism." And when I read that, I thought like, wow, that's a lot of stuff for a person to do! Right? You know, not only are you going to be, um, this anti-pipeline activist, but you're also going to...and I take it that if, you know, if you're supposed to "robustly and actively" support these things, it's not just, you know, you wish them in your heart and hope that things go well or whatever. And like, yeah, I would support that if it came up, you know, uh, on, you know, on something I could vote about, or I would give people a thumbs up or whatever. You mean like they should do something about it probably.

And so I wondered...and then you give us an, "and so on" too, and there's probably lots of other implications and ramifications of that sort of action. So do you think that any activists today actually are doing this—can meet all of these further conditions and can live up to this very strong demand of environmental moral courage? Is this, you know, is this a very, very high standard for people to live up to? Is anyone doing it now?

RACHEL

Yeah. Okay. Great. So much to say here. Um, like why is this requirement even in the account? I should say something to motivate that maybe for folks who aren't totally immersed in it.

In the literature about courage, historically people have thought of fanatics as a big problem, right? Cause if courage is supposed to be a virtue and like fanatics sometimes do really heinous things and in certain ways they look courageous, but we also don't really want to say they have a virtue. So this kind of stipulation or, or, you know, part of the account, is meant to deal with fanatics. It's meant to help us deal with that issue. And certainly, yeah, it's a *virtue*, so some protesters and other sorts of activists and advocates,

like not just protesters, everybody does a better and worse job at exhibiting this truly moral courage.

But yes, there is a lot baked into that "and so on" clause, like absolutely you're, you're right to see that. Now, why? You know, as, as you mentioned, I just think that morality is incredibly demanding, and I think those demands can be quite context specific. I also happen to think that everybody falls short of morality's demands to some degree.

And I don't even want to say that having a virtue is like a demand. I'm saying even basic obligations, we fall short. If we think of virtues as like an ideal above, you know, an obligation, different people think differently about that, whatever. I just think the demands are high and that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be trying to live up to those demands or, or trying to meet those ideals to the very best of our ability. But whether or not my work or, or work like this motivates people, I guess, just kind of depends on how willing they are to *try* to be environmentally morally courageous, even when they are not assured that they will or even *could* ever be a hundred percent successful in that endeavor. Different people respond really differently to that kind of challenge. And I kind of think that's okay because I'm not sure there's any one line of thought that will motivate a hundred percent of people, a hundred percent of the time. Yeah.

NORA

Yeah. I mean, as you're talking, I'm thinking about, yeah, just this point about obligation I think is really good because, you know, in the climate change context, for example, we are failing, you know, on a very basic level to not kill other people. Right?

RACHEL

Yeah. Possibly ourselves.

NORA

I mean, if, yeah, but even today, even right now, I mean, people have done these calculations where it's like, you know, given how many people are dying of climate related disasters right now, you know, and given your contribution to the problem, like, could we estimate how many lives you are responsible for ending right now?[1]

RACHEL

And it's super complicated.

NORA

It's non-zero. Right? So, um, and I think a lot of, you know, I think a lot of people would prefer not to be responsible for the death of other innocent people. Right? And we're just, we're already failing at that, even at this kind of very, this very basic, um, I think, point of agreement for people. So yeah. So it's hard, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to not do that.

RACHEL

Yeah. I think it's exactly the same as, um, you know, much less weighty world historical things, like not just with climate change, but with like, how to be a good friend to the guy down the street. Like, it's hard! Nobody's perfect! So yeah, I just think that's the reality of being human.

NORA

Yeah. Or if we're thinking about, you know, larger, um, you know, policies, like if we, you know, what kind of health policies or economic policies should we have? You want people who are making those decisions, to *aspire* to think of all of the downstream effects, you know, of the decisions that they're making, even if we agree that it's not going to be possible to track everything, but you want to do the best.

RACHEL

Can we just try?

NORA

Yeah. Okay. Um, so you mentioned earlier this issue of the way in which...you know, the disconnect between our actions and our own commitments can just be, you know, can be alienating can, can make us feel internally conflicted. And that, that in itself is like, you know, maybe a reason, one of the reasons to try to resolve, to bring those things into alignment more and exercise our courage. And I want to ask you a little bit more about this, and a related issue.

So you mentioned the possibility that a person could demonstrate environmental moral courage when facing only internal obstacles. And I was curious about that. So you suggest that "there seem to be cases in which standing up for one's convictions in an environmental domain requires sacrifices in other important domains of one's life, which feel like punishments brought upon oneself and which can destabilize one's sense of self in a frightening way" and I was curious what you meant. So, you emphasize that exercising moral environmental courage must involve treating others *and oneself* in morally appropriate ways. So can you just talk a little bit more about what kind of case you have in mind here where, where someone's sense of self is at stake when they engage in environmental activism?

RACHEL

Yeah, this is a great question. I mean, I have to admit that having written this article over a decade ago, I'm not confident that I remember cases I had in mind at the time. So, I'm going to give a different case that didn't exist then. It's a real life case. So admittedly, it's much messier than like a pure thought experiment would be.

Um, so, okay. In the fall of 2021, I quit my job as a professor. One important reason, but not the only reason that I did that was because I wanted to do more climate activism. I wanted

to look at my life and have it better reflect my values generally, and in particular, my views about the climate crisis.

Now I had been thinking about it and preparing by like super aggressively saving money for years and years. And for various reasons, I like decided to speed up my timeline and go for it.

It was really, really scary.

I'd spent a decade studying, you know, to get my degrees. I'd been a professor for nearly another decade. I was basically one step away from earning tenure as, as far as you can predict those kinds of things. And my self-understanding was really wrapped up in my career. There's so much in our culture to make that happen.

And of course quitting was also like financially risky. And along with the amount of financial security that I gave up, I also gave up like certain kinds of social status and relationships and activities that I valued. So, it would probably be better for others to decide for themselves whether I accepted environmental moral courage. I certainly don't know whether I managed to treat everyone else impacted with the care and respect and consideration that they deserved. You know, as I said, it's very messy. But I was motivated, at least in part, by moral concerns centered on environmental values. And the biggest obstacles that I faced in making that decision were internal to me. Could I, this person, bring myself to do something that was so financially risky? Could I *bear* to give up a position that I valued and that I would likely never be able to get back even if I wanted to? I basically had to decide who I wanted to be and whether I could sacrifice something that I saw as a really important part of my identity or another thing that I really value.

And there wasn't much that other people could do to stop me. Like few people knew that I was thinking seriously about quitting. And if they had, they wouldn't have had much ability to threaten or punish or dissuade me. Cuz like, what were they going to do? Fire me for quitting?

But I could tell like a similar story for, for other people in other cases, like my transition to veganism. I thought it was the right thing to do for a long time before I did it. So why did it take me so long? Like one reason, one reason, is that change can be scary. And so you might have to like work your way up to doing it. And, and the point is that sometimes, not always, maybe not even often, but sometimes *we* are the ones who get in our own way, you know, in the way of us living the way that we actually think is best or the way we want to, or something like that. And ideally, we'll be kind to ourselves as we struggle to come to grips with all of that. You know, whatever we figure out to do. So that's a case.

NORA

Yeah. That's a great case, or two great cases. And it's such an interesting and difficult challenge to, you know, be kind to yourself *and* challenge yourself and push yourself to do

things that, you know...like someday I could stop eating cheese. I could, I know I could do it.

RACHEL

You could do it Nora. I can help you.

NORA

You know, it's so hard, but I can do it. It's within my power. And I, you know, the other one I'm thinking about right now, as you were talking is, is *flying*. I mean, it's it, you know, it's like, and this is an interesting case where it's...and I think this is true of veganism too—and your personal case about transitioning, you know, what you were doing with your life—but it's a, it's a case where, yeah, there are personal aspects of it, but there's also the societal piece that you were talking about earlier about the way that things are set up.

RACHEL

Absolutely.

NORA

Because, you know, if our, the profession of philosophy, for example, continues to hold our most prestigious conferences without virtual options, there's, you know, sacrifices when I decide not to fly or to participate in a conference because I can't Zoom in.

RACHEL

Yeah.

NORA

And so there's, yeah, it's, you know, it's something that you have to battle over, but part of me knows, right? That the folks who...I admire the virtue of the folks who have decided not to fly or to fly very, very infrequently. I was, one rule that I had come across is like, you know, you fly once a year at max for love or friendship.[2] I thought that was pretty good. It's like, forget this flying for work stuff, you know, anyway.

RACHEL

It's a great case to think about all the ways and reasons why people reduce or eliminate flying. That that's a great case too. Yeah.

NORA

Also interesting: something that Philosophers for Sustainability are working on with the 2+1 campaign for APA.[3] So yeah, a lot of folks are thinking about these days.

Okay. Another thing I wanted to ask you about was there's this really interesting part of your paper where you connect up your discussion of moral environmental courage with other existing social problems around sexism and homophobia and just anti-queer culture. And part of your suggestion there is that if we connect up in our social understanding,

courage, this kind of traditionally masculine virtue with *environmental activism*, which is traditionally associated with the wimps and wussies and the granola eaters, then all kinds of interesting advantages could follow. Including maybe drawing, you know, drawing in some people into environmental activism who would otherwise have rejected it because stepping into it would have required them to violate social norms.

So I'm wondering about a possible consequence of this where if we make, if we make environmental activism, the sort of thing that society perceives as courageous in, in kind of the traditional sense, you know, thereby making, as you say, "thereby making it easier for people who value their toughness and realism to see themselves as environmentalists," draw them in. I wonder if this could alienate some of the softer, gentler, kumbaya singers who are already invested in environmentalism and what kind of consequences that would have for the environmental movement as a whole. So, you know, does it, do you then turn off the folks who were sort of holding the fort, you know? And what does that do to the movement?

RACHEL

Yeah, totally worth considering. Yes. I don't *know* whether this would alienate some environmentalists. I mean, probably any possible action runs some risk of alienating some people. So I just don't know how significant the risk is or how significant the loss would be. I don't know.

But I *do* think people can and should try to understand that there are lots of different ways of being an environmentalist. I mean, lots of people get this already. Like we have these stereotypes about the kumbaya singers, but like a lot of environmentalists existing actually aren't like that.

Like I think of myself as an environmentalist and I spend my time working on certain projects and not others. You know, I have certain skills and not others. I have certain personality traits and not others.

But like, that doesn't stop me from recognizing that people who focus on other projects and priorities using different skills and strategies, they really also do count as environmentalists. They are my allies, you know, in some overarching pursuit of the good, environmentally speaking and in general.

So yeah, I do think there's that risk. I have no idea how to predict like how big it is, what it really amounts to. Yeah, that's probably not satisfying.

NORA

Well, but maybe, you know, I hear you saying and tell me if this is wrong, but I hear you saying to those granola-eating environmentalists, like, "make room for other people doing environmental and environmental activism in different ways." And, you know, it's OK if it doesn't look like what it has looked like for you in the past when other people do it.

RACHEL

Yeah, I was like, for a second, I was like, no, maybe not something that forceful, Nora. And then I was like, oh, wait. Yeah. Everybody should make room. Yeah. Yeah. Everyone. Yes. Make room. OK, I take it.

NORA

Here's a related question. I was kind of wondering, it's about these, you know, drawing in people who would otherwise be turned off from environmentalism because it's, you know, not, doesn't conform to their gender norms. And I was wondering if there's...but I think this applies to outside of this case of the gender and sexism issues, to the larger argument that you're making too. There's a kind of, I'm *wondering* if there's a kind of possibility of, you know, if we follow through the actions implied by your argument, like does this whole story kind of come to undermine itself in the end? So bear with me to see if it, to see if this plays out. But so, you know, my thought is, okay, you have, you know, Scooter Braun, this example that you give of this guy who, you know, has an electric car, but, you know, he has a particular *kind* of electric car because he doesn't want to be seen as one of these wussy environmentalists.

He says, you know, "It makes you help the environment, but you also don't have to feel like a pussy," right? Okay, great guy. He, it seems to me like if he, if he's courageous and, you know, can overcome the social ramifications of being involved in environmentalism.

I mean, okay, so if you're saying, let's take, let's take what we think of as courage and allow that it applies to environmentalism and make it, make courage at home in the environmental movement such that, you know, people who aspire to be courageous don't see this as separate from the environmental movement, but rather like as totally endemic to it. And, you know, so someone like Scooter Braun or someone who is, you know, super attached to their masculinity can just, just continue to exercise that traditionally masculine virtue in their mind, but now do it in an environmental context. Does that, you know, perpetuate a lot of problems that we have with these traditional norms? Like, I'm not sure, you know, are we, are we just allowing people to continue to act in ways that are misogynist or, you know, or just otherwise unhelpful.

But on the other hand, you know, if, if we had...imagine like the liberated Scooter Braun, who is like, you know, now cool with, you know, being an environmentalist, no matter whether it's masculine or not, then in order to, to participate in activism, he doesn't have to be courageous anymore, like, because he doesn't have to overcome those social obstacles to, you know, violate the norms that he, he's seen for himself.[4] So, but, and I'm wondering if this, this could happen more broadly with your view, like if we, if we do manage to change our society and these larger systems thoroughly enough, so that there aren't such high barriers to activism, then it won't require that much courage to participate in activism.

And I guess you could say like, yeah, well, that's, that, that's fine. Like, I'm not saying courage has to be there in the, in, you know, the best future world that we can live in. We just want like these things to happen one way or the other. And if they happen, because society makes it easy and we don't have to be courageous, we can just be kind of rolling along with the way our lives would naturally go. That's great. But if, but if we're continuing to face this sort of obstacles we, we currently have in with the systems that we're steeped in and we need courage to do it, we should, you know, make sure that courage is valued as a virtue.

Yeah, I don't know. So there's kind of two questions there. There's one about like the interplay between, you know, like how much do we want to sustain these gender norms and invite them into environmentalism?

And then there's this question about like, if we create, if we recreate our society such that we get rid of some of this other toxic stuff, then do we not need courage anymore? And is that okay?

RACHEL

Okay. Interesting. There's a lot here.

I think that to the extent that we make things easier for the Scooter Brauns of the world. Yeah. That upholds the patriarchy. Like however you want to think about that, you know, gender oppression, bad gender dynamics, whatever. Upholding that, by the way, I think it's incredibly, incredibly difficult to avoid in most contexts. Like not just the ones relevant to this particular question. So that that's background.

That said, okay, things we can do to reduce the amount of courage people need to exhibit in order to do good stuff. Those are the things we should be doing, in my opinion. You know, to put it differently. I think if we can make it so that people don't need courage to do the right thing, then hooray! You know, making it easy for people to do good and be good, I think that's to be applauded. Often that is impossible. Like often morality, I think is just unavoidably hard. But no, facilitating good behavior is generally not to be frowned upon.

Like, okay, it might not like *solve* sexism and misogyny. But guess what? A lot of other things have failed to solve that. And I don't think that anything that I'm recommending would block other avenues for working on that project.

Yeah, I mean, I think you're right. About the kinds of things you're pointing out that that in some sense, like, that's a possibility. I guess I'm like biting the bullet because I think the world's really complicated. And yeah.

NORA

Yeah, I'm wondering if this, I mean, you're gonna know a whole heck of a lot more about this than I do, given the different fields that we've worked in. But I'm wondering if this just

goes to a kind of more general question in, you know, normative philosophy about, you know, whether (and maybe virtue ethics in particular) about whether to be virtuous or to, you know, exhibit these virtues, it has to be *hard* for us to do that. Or if we have to...or if it's okay, like, once we habituate ourselves to working, you know, in accordance with these virtues, and it becomes easy, and we don't have to think about it, and it's no longer kind of a more deep moral struggle in ourselves about whether we should eat cheese or not, like, and we just don't, and it's part of our day to day life that we just avoid it. Like, am I a moral person? It's just very easy for me to not eat cheese. It happens to be very easy for me.

RACHEL

Yeah. I mean, this is great. People have been reflecting on this stuff forever.

I think there are always going to be some elements of morality that are like hard for people, different elements for different people, probably. But that's because we're human. At the same time, I think you could have, you could have people doing really well morality-wise, in a world that's set up to make that a lot easier than it is in the world that I live in. I think there's a big gap there. There's a lot of leeway to make it *less* hard, even if it's never going to be not hard at all, in my opinion. I mean, that's, yeah.

NORA

Yeah, we might always retain this kind of kernel of like, the will making, you know, some kind of decision about, you know, we should we do this? Should we not do this? We might not be able to get rid of that entirely, but we can make it a lot easier on ourselves. So we don't have to battle *every* day about all things.

RACHEL

Yeah. Yeah. Like, I don't think it's like a conceptual point that like, morality is so, so hard to live up to these demands and ideals, that it's *so* hard. I don't think that's conceptual.

I think the possibility of difficulty and the fact that difficulty will arise at times, maybe that's conceptual. But like the degree of hardness, that's not baked into the definition. That's because of like, empirical reality, in my view.

NORA

Yeah. I mean, I had another question, which is just in line with what we've been talking about, but maybe I'll try and raise it anyway. But feel free to ignore this if you think we've already talked about it.

I mean, I was thinking like, you know, to my eye, at least, we have a much less activism-promoting, -accepting culture now than, say, in the civil rights era, even though it was incredibly hard, you know, it was incredibly hard for civil rights activists to carry out those actions. And there [was], you know, a lot of danger, a lot of self-sacrifice, people's lives were lost, people were severely injured, people's lives were ruined.

But like, and maybe this is just in retrospect, I don't know. I mean, but the civil rights movement was so *large* in a way, right? I mean, it was really like, not just a handful of people who, you know, society kind of larger society. I mean, I feel this way about when I think the general outlook on environmental activism these days, it's not, maybe not quite, oh, it's a handful of extremists, but like, there's these kind of people in the fringe who, you know, you have, like, Extinction Rebellion, or, you know, people who are doing more direct actions, and it just doesn't feel like society owns them as, like, *our cause*, and oh, here are the people, like, at the frontline of the, you know, fighting for the good, towards the good. And I think that's really distressing.

And I wonder, I mean, it makes me think that like, it probably, maybe this is just, you know, really unfair to say, but it makes me think that it might be more courageous, in a way, to act now, in a society that is so unfriendly to environmental activism, than even it was to participate as a member of this, you know, at the height, maybe at the height of the civil rights movement, where you could show up at the March on Washington, and there were so many people, and it was, you know, I don't know.

Is it, and then...so this goes back to what we were talking about earlier, which is like, if we were to make, I think, real progress in, you know, rewriting our social norms, such that environmental activism was valued, and, you know, put front and center in terms of what we hope for, for the future, and what we think people ought to be doing with their time, and would that, would that just then require less courage?

And is that okay? You know, if, like...are we hoping for more courage, or are we hoping for just a societal change, and courage is a way to get there?

RACHEL

Okay, yeah, a lot to think about here. I'm not sure I agree that there actually was more of a culture of civil disobedience in, like, the civil rights movement, or the Vietnam War era. I mean, I wasn't alive then,

NORA

Neither was I.

RACHEL

and if I were, hindsight is different, and the media landscape has changed, and there's a lot of revisionary history, in that, like, a lot of people pretend like they were cool with King, because he's been so valorized in our culture, but a lot of those people were not cool with King at the time.

I've also seen some studies about, you know, more people say they were at this important historical protest than could have possibly been there, given things like headcounts and photographic evidence. So, like, kind of, there's two things. There's the culture of civil disobedience, or whatever you want to call it, it might involve, like, how many people are

participating. I'm not sure we are always clear about that, in the past or in the present. And then there's also, like, the wider cultural acceptance. And again, I'm not always sure we're clear about what that really is.

What people say about it and what they feel in their heart of hearts might be different for lots of reasons, like, we know that. So, I'm just not positive about any of that. And I also hesitate to kind of say that people of this whole era are generally more courageous than people of this whole other era.

I think comparing different people's courage is probably best done at a pretty granular level. Like, given, like, we're talking about a virtue, you have to do it in the right way at the right time, you know, with the right attitude and all that. So, okay, enough of that.

Let's get to what I think is maybe the heart of the question here, which is: context matters. Yes. It takes a lot more courage to do a given action in some context than in others. I totally agree with that. And how much depends not just on the general level of acceptance of that type of action in your cultural or social context, but also on, like, the very particular things about your social position and your personality and your experience and probably a million other things. I would really love it if we could create a culture in which courage is less necessary in order to support environmental causes, like, in a robust way.

So, a culture in which doing that stuff is more often simply just a matter of course. I'm actually doing some work right now on a big project that directly relates to that.

However, I think that so long as individual humans and human institutions are, like, imperfect and vulnerable, which I expect to always be the case, there's going to be times when courage, and specifically environmental moral courage, is necessary. Like, even if we develop a much better, extremely robust culture of environmental activism, lots of people are doing it and it is socially accepted, like, to a greater degree. I still think there are going to be times when environmental activism is going to be necessary and it's going to require courage. It's just going to be different what those times look like as the culture changes and as time goes by.

NORA

Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. Thank you.

Okay, in the final paragraph of your paper, you leave us with these three, like, really big topics. I love that because I think, you know, that should inspire people who read your paper and who, you know, hear about your work to think through some of these issues on their own. But I wondered if we could try and jump-start those thought processes and conversations, if you like, if you have anything else you want to say about them now.

So, you talk about, you know, things that you didn't get to in the paper super thoroughly are, you know, the relation between courage and compromise, theoretical and practical

questions about how people can become environmentally courageous (I think that's a huge one. Maybe especially, I feel like folks are always hungry for the practical question here, right? Like, okay, I'm on board. I want to be more environmentally courageous. And then how do I go about it, really, in my life?), and then third, what can we do to help environmentalists and others recognize and value instances of environmental courage? And that's another kind of practical question about how we might influence the movement and society more broadly, in addition to how we might think about, you know, changing our own habits and actions.

So, I'm wondering if you wanted to add anything to what you would say. It's funny that it's, this paper was published 10 years ago. This is the 10th anniversary of this paper! This is fantastic, right? So, 10 years ago, you had these big open issues. I wondered if you wanted to add anything.

RACHEL

Yeah, jeepers. One would hope that with over 10 years to think about it, a person could have come up with some sort of brilliant insight. I mean, I thought these things were important then. I still think they're important now. If anything, though, now I feel like these issues are even more thorny than I realized back then. You know, I'm older, whatever.

I can say a little bit about working toward environmental moral courage. It takes practice, you know, like all virtues. And most of the interventions that I would sort of tentatively recommend would involve bringing the costs and risks down.

We can do that at the social level, but we can also do it at the individual level. This is something, obviously, we've mentioned before. It's a way so that people can get started with activities.

I don't even want to say "activism" because I use that word a lot, but a lot of people think of a pretty narrow thing when they hear that. But I mean something really broad. Like you mentioned earlier the case of the suburban homeowner who gives up the lush green grass lawn and has a more environmentally friendly lawn. Like other people might not call that activism, but I think that actually would count. So how can people get started with stuff that involves like a more easily attainable level of courage? Okay, more concretely, what do I have in mind?

I would encourage folks to find people who you already like or who you want to get to know better and work with them to do something environmentally courageous in your community or school or household or workplace or whatever. It's easier to be courageous if you have a buddy to support you and hold you accountable. And if you start small! It's more likely that, you know, by working with other like-minded folks, you can actually achieve something of substance. And once you've done that and it feels good, it makes it more likely that you can do something a bit more courageous next time.

Like in my case, the first time I ever went to a protest, I won't lie, I was scared. Like I grew up in a small town where that was not something that I encountered. And, you know, I wasn't one of these people who their parents took them to the protest when they were six. That was not my experience. And I did hear people growing up who had really actively like disparaged these kinds of things when they made the news.

But the first time I went to a protest, well, I was with people who I trusted and admired. And I had a good time. And I was quite safe. And I felt really good about publicly, you know, voicing my support for something that I thought was important. It was like, wow, this is a whole new source of *meaning* in my life.

And since then, like, I've been able to step up a lot more in those kinds of situations over time. Like not that I'm like some paragon of courage, but just like anything, when you practice, you get better. And if you have a buddy, life is nicer. It's like not rocket science, but Eugene Chislenko with, you know, Philosophers for Sustainability, he always says this, like, find a buddy, do what's within reach.

If everybody was doing that, we could do a lot. Like, just be creative about looking for something that's within reach. And it might not look like the thing that's within reach for the next guy.

NORA

Or for you, years down the line, after you've had some practice.

RACHEL

Yeah. And it's never too late. Like, some of these things I've already mentioned, like, it took me a long time to work up to them. You know, it's easy to look back and say, oh, I did it!

But it's like, yeah, and it took me how many years to get to I did it?

NORA

Cool. Well, the final question that I had for you was just, you know, looking back on this paper now, years later, is there anything that you would change about it or change about the argument or that you might add or do differently now that you've taken a look at it again?

RACHEL

So much. I would do so much differently. If I continued this project now, or redid it, whatever.

A lot has happened, obviously, in the wider world. And I've learned a lot. I'd be ashamed if that weren't the case. I can mention a few things, I guess.

I really did have climate change on my mind when I wrote this. But I was also thinking about environmental problems more widely. These problems are all connected. And I wouldn't want to lose sight of that. But if I were taking up the project now, it would be much more narrowly focused on climate crisis stuff in particular.

I also would have said more about how since courage is a trait, one needs to habitually do courageous things to count as courageous. When you're talking about cases in a paper, it's easy to talk about just one isolated action or activity. But doing a courageous action one time does not make you a courageous person.

So focusing a bit more on iterated choices would also help people think about, and maybe become more courageous in the first place. Again, it's something you have to build up to. I mentioned my own evolving participation in protests, but the same thing goes for other types of cases. Whether it's public speaking, or writing for publication, or giving away some money and taking on financial risk, or just talking to your friends about climate emotions, or figuring out how to do more climate-friendly stuff at work. These are things that people probably have to practice to get good at. And for a variety of reasons, you might never get totally comfortable doing certain things.

But you can get more comfortable and more effective with practice. And there are just so many ways we could exhibit courage for the sake of the climate. I mean, everybody has talents that are useful in the struggle to stabilize the climate. Everyone can use their courage in different ways to advance that project. And to the extent that we join together in that and act in ways that actually express our values, not only are we helping avert the most nightmarish consequences of the crisis, but we're also living profoundly meaningful, connected lives. It feels good.

And with so many lonely and despairing people out there, doesn't that option sound really lovely?

NORA

Absolutely!

RACHEL

Yeah. Not just about what I'm fighting against, but what I'm fighting for.

You know, a life that looks like something I can feel good about. A life with other people. I think everyone wants that to some degree.

NORA

Yeah, a meaningful life with other people where we're working towards how we want the world to be. I mean, sounds great!

RACHEL

Let's do it!

NORA

Well, thank you so much for speaking with me, Rachel. This is really wonderful to hear a little bit more about some of your thoughts about environmental courage and to take this conversation in some other directions using your paper as a launching point. So thank you so much.

RACHEL

Thank you for prompting some interesting stuff with questions that were really valuable that I'm going to keep thinking about. Yeah. Okay, have a good one.

NORA

Thanks.

Notes

1. Nora was thinking of the estimate by Colin (2021, 357), which puts the probability that "I would be responsible for pushing at least *someone* over the threshold" at 86.5%. See https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820820000461.

2. Nora was thinking of adrienne maree brown's rule about flying, which she mentions in this interview with Krista Tippett: https://onbeing.org/programs/adrienne-maree-brown-on-radical-imagination-and-moving-towards-life/.

3. Learn more at https://www.philosophersforsustainability.com/apa-2-plus-1-campaign/.

4. Note from Nora: what I was trying to suggest was that if Braun had to overcome his attachment to masculinity to participate in environmental activism, that would require him to be courageous, but if we understand traditionally masculine courage as endemic to environmental activism, then Braun (and folks like him) don't have to be courageous to publicly participate.