

Belief vs. Action

Some of Kayla's students have just asked her to be the adviser of their Environmental Club. Kayla is not surprised; she regularly teaches an Environmental Ethics class and incorporates environmental issues in many of her other classes. She also proudly displays environmental stickers on her car, laptop, and office door. She has invited quite a few environmental speakers to campus and helped organized many environmental events.

And yet she sometimes feels like a fraud. If students knew how she lives her daily life, they'd be shocked. She believes in biking and walking, but she rarely does either. In fact, with three kids at home, Kayla and her husband own not one, but two minivans. This way, either one of them can pick up the kids from school and take them (along with their sports equipment and musical instruments) to their after-school activities. Her house, purchased when they were expecting their third child, is very comfortable, but it's also large and energy inefficient. Her yard is big grass lawn which is not environmentally friendly;¹ she'd love to replace it with a big vegetable patch but hasn't got around to it. Kayla also knows that refraining from eating meat and dairy is one of the most effective ways to reduce her negative impact on the Earth.² But her husband and kids love these products, and it's difficult for the family to cook two separate meals. Being pressed for time and money also leads them to buy more packaged stuff, more disposable items, and new items rather than used ones. And of course, having three biological children isn't exactly environmentally friendly: for example, while recycling saves 0.21 tons of CO₂-equivalent per year and living car-free saves 2.4 tons, having one fewer child saves 58.6 tons.³ In short, Kayla feels that she is not living up to her principles. She's not even sure if she can call herself an environmentalist. Surely an essential part of being an environmentalist is living like one.

However, Kayla also thinks that it's morally permissible—even praiseworthy—to convince other people to adopt more environmentally friendly practices, even if you don't do that in your own life. After all, we don't expect everyone who advocates for sports or arts in schools to be an athlete or an artist.

Furthermore, Kayla tries to remind herself that advocacy work is also important and might be even more important than personal choices. Her classes, the events she organizes, and even her posts on social media might do more good than the changes she could make in her personal life. Advising the Environmental Club would enable her to do even more good and inspire many more students to advocate for environmental issues and make a difference. Disclosing how she actually lives feels more honest, but it might undermine her work, making people take her arguments less seriously. So, while she's not 100% sure of herself, Kayla plans to accept the students' invitation and to continue advocating for the environmental causes she believes in.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Did Kayla make the right decision in agreeing to advise the Environmental Club?
2. Does Kayla have a duty to tell her students that she engages in a variety of environmentally irresponsible actions in her personal life?
3. How does Kayla compare with Angela, who does no advocacy work but lives an environmentally friendly life?

¹ <https://earthier.com/lawns-are-an-ecological-disaster-1826070720>

² https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/31/avoiding-meat-and-dairy-is-single-biggest-way-to-reduce-your-impact-on-earth?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/12/want-to-fight-climate-change-have-fewer-children>