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Climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility

Bell, Derek; Swaffield, Joanne; Peeters, Wouter

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Climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility

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Corresponding Author:	Derek Bell, PhD The University of Newcastle - Newcastle City Campus UNITED KINGDOM
Corresponding Author Secondary Information:	
Corresponding Author's Institution:	The University of Newcastle - Newcastle City Campus
Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution:	
First Author:	Derek Bell, PhD
First Author Secondary Information:	
Order of Authors:	Derek Bell, PhD
	Joanne Swaffield, PhD
	Wouter Peeters, PhD
Order of Authors Secondary Information:	
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Author contact info

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Derek Bell (Department of Politics, Newcastle University)

Joanne Swaffield (Department of Politics, Newcastle University)

Wouter Peeters (Centre for the Study of Global Ethics, University of Birmingham)

Address for correspondence: Politics, Politics Building, 40-42 Great North Road, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne. UK. NE1 7RU.

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Climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility

Abstract

What responsibilities does each of us have to reduce or limit our greenhouse gas emissions? Advocates of individual emissions reductions acknowledge that there are limits to what we can reasonably demand from individuals. Climate ethics has not yet systematically explored those limits. Instead, it has become popular to suggest that such judgements should be 'context-sensitive' but this does not tell us what role different contextual factors should play in our moral thinking. The current approach to theory development in climate ethics is not likely to be the most effective way to fill this gap. In existing work, climate ethicists use hypothetical cases to consider what can be reasonably demanded of individuals in particular situations. In contrast, 'climate ethics *with an ethnographic sensibility*' uses qualitative social science methods to collect original data in which real individuals describe their own situations. These real-life cases are more realistic, more detailed and cover a broader range of circumstances than hypothetical cases. Normative analysis of real-life cases can help us to develop a more systematic understanding of the role that different contextual factors should play in determining individual climate responsibilities. It can also help us to avoid the twin dangers of 'idealization' and 'special pleading'.

Key words

Climate change; climate ethics; individual responsibility; ethnography; idealization; flying.

1. Introduction

What should *you* or *I* do about climate change? We know that the cumulative effects of greenhouse gas emissions pose a serious threat to the human rights of people now and in the future (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2009; Bell 2011; Caney 2009). Sadly, the world's governments have hitherto failed to deliver effective action on climate change. As a result, many people living in affluent states are prompted to ask themselves, 'What should *I* do about climate change?' This is a question about individual responsibility.

There is an important strand of work in climate ethics that argues each of us has a responsibility to reduce or limit our greenhouse gas emissions even if the law does not require us to do so. For some, it is obvious that it is reasonable to demand substantial reductions from most citizens of affluent societies. However, advocates of individual emission reductions invariably acknowledge that there are limits to what we can reasonably demand from individuals: there is a line to be drawn between 'special pleading' and 'reasonable partiality'. Climate ethics has not yet systematically explored those limits. Instead, it has become popular to suggest that such judgements should be made on a 'case-by-case' basis and should be 'context-sensitive'. However, the general recommendation that we make judgements that are context-sensitive does not tell us what role different contextual factors should play in our moral thinking. We believe this is a significant gap in our current understanding of climate ethics.

In this article, we argue that the current approach to theory development in climate ethics is not likely to be the most effective way of filling this gap. In existing work, climate ethicists imagine possible situations and consider what can be reasonably demanded of individuals in those situations. We propose that this standard approach should be supplemented with an alternative method for generating specific cases for normative analysis. We call our approach 'climate ethics *with an ethnographic sensibility*'. This approach uses qualitative social science methods to collect original data in which real individuals describe their own situations. We use this data to generate specific (real-life) cases for normative analysis.

Climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility is a multidisciplinary approach, which, in our view, has two major advantages. First, we argue that this approach helps us to move beyond the general recognition of the importance of context in moral thinking about individual responsibility to a more systematic understanding of the role that different contextual factors should play in it. Second, climate ethics relies on hypothetical, *idealized* conceptions of moral agents, which are not consistent with our best background theories in psychology and related disciplines. We argue that our approach can help us to avoid this problematic idealization.

By virtue of these advantages, climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility helps to ensure that climate ethics is practically relevant *here and now*. Moreover, we suggest that our multi-disciplinary approach should be fruitful in other areas of applied ethics where we are concerned about not making 'unreasonable' demands on moral agents.

This article is organised into eight sections. In Section 2, we locate our research question, 'What role should different contextual factors play in our moral thinking about personal consumption responsibilities?' in the existing literature on individual responsibilities. In Section 3, we illustrate how hypothetical cases have been used by climate ethicists to help them think about personal consumption responsibilities. In Section 4, we introduce the idea of climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility. In Section 5, we explain how this approach can help us to avoid idealizations without endorsing special pleading. In Section 6, we introduce our pilot study and describe the methods that we used to collect qualitative data for normative analysis. In Section 7, we illustrate our approach using two 'real' cases – relating to air travel – drawn from our data. We aim to show that normative analysis of ethnographic data can make a substantive contribution to climate ethics. In Section 8, we conclude by suggesting that our ethnographic approach may be useful beyond personal consumption responsibilities and even beyond climate ethics.

2. Personal consumption responsibilities

The discussion of individual responsibilities in climate ethics has made use of the liberal distinction between 'political' actions, which are aimed at promoting effective climate institutions, and 'personal' actions, which are aimed at limiting or reducing one's own carbon footprint. The discussion of political actions has tended to focus on voting and campaigning (see, for example, Maltais 2013 and Caney 2014) while the discussion of personal actions has focused on changing consumption behaviours, including how we travel and use energy (see, for example, Gardner and Stern 2008 and Peeters et al. 2015). There is near universal agreement in the literature that individuals have political responsibilities (or duties) to promote effective climate institutions but less agreement on the specifics of those responsibilities (Tan 2015, Baatz and Voget-Kleschin 2019). The disagreements reflect different views on the political efficacy of different types of action as well as different positions on what we can reasonably demand from individual citizens (see, for example, Cripps 2013, Maltais 2013, Caney 2014). In this article, we will say very little about political

responsibilities but focus instead on personal consumption responsibilities. However, as we explain in Section 8, we believe that the approach that we advocate could be used to develop a more systematic account of our individual political responsibilities.

There is a significant debate in the climate ethics literature about whether or not individuals have personal responsibilities to change their consumption behaviours. Critics of personal consumption responsibilities argue that individual consumption behaviours are inconsequential: each individual's behaviour makes no difference to whether (or how much) others suffer climate harms (Cripps 2013, Johnson 2003, Sinnott-Armstrong 2005). If my behaviour makes no causal difference and, therefore, causes no harm, there are no grounds for limiting my freedom to consume. The argument from inconsequentialism depends on conceptual, empirical and moral assumptions, which have been challenged by advocates of personal consumption responsibilities.

Conceptually, critics of the argument from inconsequentialism challenge the way that it understands causation. The argument from inconsequentialism assumes that if C is a *cause* of *effect* E, E would not have happened without C. Alternative accounts of causation suggest other ways that C can be a 'causally relevant factor' for E even if E would (or might) have happened without C (Hiller 2011, Baatz and Voget-Kleschin 2019). On these alternative accounts, my emissions-generating behaviours are causally connected to climate harms, therefore, there may be consequentialist grounds for limiting my freedom. Empirically, critics of the argument from inconsequentialism argue that sometimes one individual's emissions-generating behaviours do cause (or are a causally relevant factor for) climate harms (Nolt 2011). Similarly, there may be times when one individual refraining from emissions-generating behaviours might be causally relevant for the avoidance of climate harms, for example, by causally contributing to political decisions that prevent harmful emissions (Neuteleers 2010). Other critics of the argument from inconsequentialism challenge the assumption that personal consumption responsibilities must be justified on consequentialist grounds. Instead, they offer non-consequentialist justifications, including fairness arguments, integrity arguments, and arguments based on a range of virtues, such as frugality and humility (Hourdequin 2010, Jamieson 2007, 2014, Knight 2019). On these accounts, the justification for personal consumption responsibilities does not depend on a causal connection between my emissions-generating behaviour and climate harms. In our previous work, we have defended personal consumption responsibilities against the argument from inconsequentialism (Bell 2005, Peeters et al 2015). We will not repeat those arguments here. We assume that personal consumption responsibilities can be defended against inconsequentialism.

If individuals do have personal consumption responsibilities, what are those responsibilities? This is a difficult question for those climate ethicists who advocate personal consumption responsibilities. There is near universal agreement that how much an individual should do is limited by what can be reasonably demanded of them.[1] However, there is little clarity on what can be reasonably demanded. It is common to recognise that legitimate concerns about personal or familial well-being

[1] In this article, we follow the path that is commonly taken in discussions of what can be reasonably demanded of individuals by focussing on the role of legitimate concerns about personal or familial well-being. However, a full account of our individual climate responsibilities might need to consider how personal consumption responsibilities (or individual climate responsibilities more generally) should be weighed against (or reconciled with) other moral responsibilities to distant strangers, such as those suffering as a result of war, oppression, discrimination or poverty, and special moral responsibilities to friends, compatriots and others with whom we have special relationships.

might limit what can reasonably be demanded of individuals.[2] Moreover, some structural constraints, ranging from the local transport infrastructure to the global economic system, might combine with these concerns to provide a broader range of justifications (or excusing conditions) for emissions-generating behaviours. However, the range, role and significance of different contextual factors has not been systematically studied. Instead, recent contributions to the literature have tended either to suggest that nothing more determinate can be said about our personal responsibilities or that personal consumption responsibilities can only be judged on a 'context-sensitive' 'case-by-case' basis (Baatz 2014, 10; Fragniere 2016, 809; Fruh and Hedahl 2013; Raterman 2012; Hedberg 2018). We acknowledge that moral theorising is not algorithmic and may not even be determinate but it seems premature to give up on this practically important area of study in climate ethics. Therefore, this article considers how we might pursue a case-by-case approach to thinking about personal consumption responsibilities. In the next section, we begin by reviewing how this has been done in climate ethics to date.

3. Hypothetical cases and theory development in climate ethics

So far, there has been no systematic attempt to explore a wide range of particular cases to develop a better understanding of the role that different contextual factors should play in our thinking about personal consumption responsibilities. However, some climate ethicists have used hypothetical cases in an *ad hoc* way. In this section, we show how this approach has been used by one of the leading proponents of personal consumption responsibilities.

Baatz (2014, 10) imagines two cases that he suggests help us to think about the limits of what can be reasonably demanded of individuals. In the first case, he asks us to consider:

> 'an (elderly) person living in a rural area in the US who depends on her car to buy food and to participate in social and cultural activities because no public transport system is available or she is not able to use it. Let us further assume that she lives in a poorly insulated house, lacks the means to invest in improved insulation and there are no governmental programs subsidizing credits etc.'[3]

[2] Some authors (for example, Peeters et al. 2015 and Vanderheiden 2008) have referred to Shue's (1993, 2001) seminal distinction between *subsistence emissions* and *luxury emissions* to determine which emissions reductions can be reasonably demanded of individuals. More specifically, while it is unreasonable to demand that people forego emissions needed to reach subsistence (including adequate food, water and shelter), they should at the very least reduce emissions that would unambiguously classify as luxury emissions (for example, profligate energy consumption, or the excessive consumption of animal products). However, this distinction involves an important line-drawing problem, and even though both extremes of the continuum between subsistence and luxury emissions might be clear, many emissions fall in the grey area between these extremes. What classifies as subsistence or luxury emissions also depends on contextual factors and personal circumstances, and we will argue below that such factors and circumstances can be most appropriately analysed by adopting an ethnographic sensibility in climate ethics. In addition, Meyer and Sanklecha (2011) argue that many people have the expectation that they will be able to continue certain activities, even if these result in a high level of greenhouse gas emissions. Under certain conditions, the authors argue, this expectation can be legitimate, but they also acknowledge the difficulty of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate expectations. Illegitimate expectations might be understood as a type of special pleading. We argue that adopting an ethnographic sensibility can help us to distinguish legitimate excusing conditions from special pleading (see Section 5).

[3] We have omitted a footnote from the quotation.

He concludes that reducing her emissions below 2 t CO_2 per annum (a plausible individual fair share of emissions rights on an equal per capita basis) would 'have harsh consequences on her life.' Her life 'would not be decent anymore' because she 'would lack some capabilities, for instance the "capability for love and friendship"'.

In his second case, Baatz (2014, 10) imagines:

> 'an academic, perhaps one working on the ethical dimension of climate change. To foster his career and to increase chances that he will be hired again after his current funding ends, he has to participate in conferences, more often than not far away from where he works.'

He suggests that the academic's emissions might not be necessary to safeguard his existence, they nonetheless are 'required to guarantee a very important part of life (in Western culture): work.' He concludes that thinking about this case makes it 'clear that to just give up flying is not as easy as one might think at first.'

Baatz draws three types of conclusion from these cases. First, he uses his considered moral judgements about these particular cases to inform his assessment of a moral principle that requires every individual to reduce their emissions below 2 t CO_2 per annum. In the first case, he concludes that a moral principle that imposed such a stringent personal consumption duty on the elderly person should be rejected because 'it seems like asking for too much' from her (Baatz 2014, 10). In the second case, he is more equivocal about whether such a moral principle should be rejected because it requires the academic not to fly.

The second type of conclusion he draws from these cases relates to morally salient factors or principles that set limits to what can be reasonably demanded of individuals. In the first case, Baatz suggests that his considered moral judgement about the case is underpinned by a principle that individuals should not be required to sacrifice the 'capability for love and friendship'. In the second case, he appeals to the moral salience of 'work': it may be too demanding to ask an individual to refrain from doing things that are necessary for them to work.

Baatz's third type of conclusion is drawn from a joint consideration of both cases. He argues that both cases highlight the moral relevance of empirical facts about how 'individuals depend on the (energy and mobility) structures they live in.' For many individuals, the existing infrastructure means that living 'a low-carbon life can be associated with high economic, social and psychological costs.' However, the 'the options and possibilities of particular agents … can differ considerably', therefore, the costs of reducing emissions will also vary among persons. These differences in costs are morally relevant when we consider what changes in personal consumption behaviour can be reasonably demanded of any individual.

Baatz's use of hypothetical cases – and his broader approach to thinking about personal consumption responsibilities – is consistent with the method of wide reflective equilibrium, which is a standard method of political and moral philosophy. We can understand him to be seeking 'to produce coherence' in three 'sets of beliefs' that he holds: (1) his 'considered moral judgements'; (2) his 'moral principles'; and (3) his 'relevant background theories' (Daniels 1979, 258). The lack of coherence between his considered moral judgements or intuitions about these cases and a moral principle that requires that every individual limits their emissions to 2 t CO_2 per annum leads to his rejection of that principle. Instead, he proposes an alternative moral principle, namely, that every individual has a 'duty to reduce emissions as far as can *reasonably* be demanded of them' (Baatz

2014, 10). He suggests that this is consistent with his considered moral judgements about the two cases and with the principle that individuals should not be required to sacrifice the 'capability for love and friendship'. Moreover, his considered moral judgements about the cases and his moral principles cohere with his empirical background theory that the economic, social and psychological costs of reducing emissions in the existing infrastructure may be high and differ between individuals.

Despite long-standing criticism (see for example Brandt 1990; Hare 1973), the method of wide reflective equilibrium is widely regarded as the most appropriate method for ethics. In climate ethics, there has been no explicit discussion of the appropriateness of the method of wide reflective equilibrium. Instead, climate ethicists have simply adopted the method of the broader discipline in which their work is located. They defend and critically examine claims about personal consumption responsibilities by considering the coherence among their considered moral judgements, including judgements about particular hypothetical cases, their background theories and potential moral principles.

4. Beyond hypothetical cases: Climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility

Baatz's work is an excellent illustration of how hypothetical cases can be used as 'intuition pumps' (Dennett 2013) to prompt moral thinking about the role of different contextual factors in determining personal consumption responsibilities. So far, climate ethicists have tended to use a few hypothetical examples to support particular moral claims or to gesture towards the kinds of considerations that might be important in a fuller account. They have not tried to develop that fuller account through more systematic consideration of a broader range of examples. In our view, a key challenge for climate ethics is to undertake this more systematic study of the relevance of different contextual factors for our thinking about what can reasonably be demanded of individuals. If it is fruitful, this research programme may help us to understand which factors – and which combinations of factors – justify or excuse emissions-generating behaviours.[4]

The broader range of examples needed to pursue this research programme might be developed in the same way as the examples we have already seen in the literature. However, hypothetical examples created by climate ethicists are likely to reflect the interests and experiences of the small and relatively homogenous group who create them. For example, Baatz's example of an academic who travels by air to attend conferences to enhance his job prospects is one that reflects his (and our) experiences. It is, of course, possible for climate ethicists to draw on what they observe of other people's lives or what people tell them or what they read about people's lives. Unfortunately, this may still leave them with a skewed set of hypothetical examples.

The range of experiences that climate ethicists observe, hear or read about is likely to be limited by their social, economic and cultural position or background. The most plausible way to try to overcome this problem may be for climate ethicists to draw on social science research about people's experiences and the choices and constraints that they face.[5] We want to propose that

[4] We might think of this research programme as seeking to identify principles that should govern each individual's emissions-generating behaviour. The principles may be at different levels of generality (i.e., relate to more or less common contextual factors), may be more or less important and may be combined in different ways (e.g., some may take priority over others while others can be weighed against each other).

[5] There is a substantial body of work across the social sciences on pro-climate behaviour and the factors that promote it and prevent it (Gifford and Nilsson 2014). Social scientists have used a variety of methods to examine the factors that affect pro-climate behaviour. In the simplest terms, we might distinguish methods

climate ethicists should use original qualitative data that is specifically collected for their purposes using data collection methods that enable individuals to describe their own situations.

There is an increasing interest in ethics and political philosophy in listening to what non-philosophers think about ethical issues. Our proposal for climate ethics builds on one strand of that work. We argue that climate ethics should be informed by fieldwork that is done with an 'ethnographic sensibility' (Herzog and Zacka 2017). This kind of fieldwork can produce the broad range of detailed narrative accounts of real-life contexts that we need as intuition pumps to improve our understanding of personal climate responsibilities. In Section 6, we outline a specific version of this method, which we have used in a pilot study. In our pilot study, we used interviews and reflective diaries to collect data. However, other qualitative data collection methods, such as life histories and observational research, might also be used to good effect.

As Herzog and Zacka (2017, 764) describe it, the central feature of fieldwork with an 'ethnographic sensibility' is that it is concerned with how people 'perceive, think about, and ascribe meaning to their environment and behaviour.' It is particularly concerned with understanding 'how people respond to specific situations' and it aims to 'make sense of what these situations look like to them.' In the context of normative ethics, 'adopting an ethnographic sensibility means being attuned to how individuals understand themselves as situated moral and political agents.' We aim to produce data that gives us an insight into how people interpret their own situations and what they identify as the morally relevant features of them. Ethnographic data does not provide a 'pure' first-person account of a person's situation because it is co-produced by the researcher and the research participant (Herzog and Zacka 2017, 778). For example, in an interview the data is produced through the conversation between the researcher and the research participant.

By paying attention to detailed co-produced accounts we may be able to see that the 'moral terrain … is more complex and nuanced than one may have suspected from afar' (Herzog and Zacka 2017, 768). Our data might suggest that there are morally salient considerations that we had not previously identified in hypothetical examples. We might also judge that some considerations are more or less weighty or that their role in moral reasoning is different in different contexts (Herzog and Zacka 2017, 770). On the other hand, we might come to the conclusion that considerations that appeared morally salient in hypothetical examples are not significant in real-life cases because the hypothetical examples are based on empirically false assumptions or over-simplifications. More radically, our data might suggest new moral concepts, principles or frameworks for thinking about what each of us should do (Herzog and Zacka 2017, 773).

Ethics with an ethnographic sensibility requires that we undertake fieldwork that generates a broad range of real-life cases to use as intuition pumps. We work towards a wide reflective equilibrium in which our considered moral judgements about these cases are aligned with relevant background theories and with a moral theory that identifies the role of different contextual factors in determining our personal consumption responsibilities.

5. Special pleading and three problems of idealization in climate ethics

Traditional ethicists are likely to worry that ethics with an ethnographic sensibility might be too sensitive to the views of research participants. This is a danger that we need to be aware of but it should not be exaggerated. Our proposal is not that we should treat research participants as epistemic authorities on what is morally correct. As Herzog and Zacka (2017, 768) note, 'An ethnographic sensibility is in no way a substitute for independent moral reflection. Rather, it

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that produce quantitative data, such as social surveys, from methods that produce qualitative data, such as interviews, focus groups, diaries and observational research

provides us with … material on the basis of which we can engage in such reflection.' Ethics with an ethnographic sensibility requires normative analysis of the data just as political science or anthropology with an ethnographic sensibility requires empirical analysis of the data.

Moreover, our approach gives a different and more modest role to the moral views of non-philosophers than some recent work in 'empirical' or 'experimental' ethics does (Luetge *et al*. 2014). We do not seek to elicit the moral intuitions that non-philosophers have about hypothetical cases or even about real-life cases in which they are not involved. So, we do not suggest that their intuitions about these cases should replace, or even have equal authority with, the considered moral judgements of trained ethicists, who have devoted considerable time to the study of ethics (Swift 1999). Instead, we seek to use people's accounts of their own situations and behaviour, including their perceptions of the morally relevant features, as material for ethical reflection. On our approach, ethical reflection requires 'a certain openness – a readiness to be surprised … and to abandon one's tacit assumptions and pre-conceived ideas' (Herzog and Zacka 2017, 778). We do not seek to apply a particular ethical theory, such as utilitarianism or Rawls's two principles, to the cases as some applied ethicists might do. We aim to 'temporarily suspend such commitments' as we consider how our considered moral judgements about the co-produced cases align with relevant background theories and alternative moral principles (Herzog and Zacka 2017, 778).

Traditional ethicists might still be concerned that climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility is likely to be prone to special pleading. We can expect research participants in affluent societies to engage in special pleading by giving disproportionate moral significance to the challenges and costs that they would incur by undertaking pro-climate behaviour.[6] This may be because they under-estimate the moral significance of climate harms or because they over-estimate the moral significance of the costs of pro-climate behaviour. Moreover, their empirical beliefs may not be supported by plausible background theories in the natural or social sciences.[7] In sum, traditional ethicists might argue that climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility is inconsistent with key features of moral thinking, notably impartiality and detachment.

This is a concern that we take seriously. However, we believe that over-emphasising impartiality and detachment can lead to problems of idealization. O'Neill distinguishes two problems of idealization in ethical reasoning. The first problem is that 'Descriptions of agents … are often *idealized*: they are satisfied only by hypothetical agents whose cognitive and volitional capacities human beings lack' (O'Neill 1987, 56). They assume conceptions of the person that are not consistent with our best background theories in psychology and related disciplines. The second problem is that some ethical theories treat these false descriptions as '*ideals* for human action. … We are to think of *idealized* agents … as admirable and super-human rather than as irrelevant to human choosing, let alone sub-human' (O'Neill 1987, 56). A psychologically implausible conception of the person does not make a good moral ideal. Climate ethics needs to avoid idealization just as much as it needs to avoid special pleading.

We believe that over-emphasising impartiality and detachment can lead to three *idealizations*. First, the idea that human agents should be wholly impartial between their own interests and the interests of other people, including distant strangers and future generations, is an unattractive ideal for human action (see for example Cullity 2004; Mulgan 2001). Good human lives must have space

[6] Worth remembering in this context is the declaration of former U.S. President George Bush at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro that 'the American lifestyle is not up for negotiation' (quoted in Singer 2002, 2).
[7] We can expect that research participants will reveal their beliefs about a wide range of issues, including many issues that have been studied by natural and social scientists. Normative analysis will draw on work in other disciplines to identify beliefs that are not consistent with plausible background theories. However, normative analysis might also suggest that some types of empirical error are morally excusable and there may be circumstances in which excusably erroneous beliefs excuse emissions-generating behaviours. We discuss the problem of idealizing assumptions about cognitive competence below.

for personal goals and special attachments to family or friends (Williams 1973; Wolf 1992; Neuteleers 2019). Climate ethicists recognise this when they acknowledge that we should not ask people to sacrifice more than can 'reasonably be demanded of them' (Baatz 2014, 10). The aim of our research is to understand better the limits of 'reasonable partiality' in the context of climate change (Nagel 1991, 38). We ask, 'What role or weight should personal projects and relationships have in an agent's ethical reasoning about actions that cause or depend on greenhouse gas emissions?' Climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility draws on first-person accounts of the role that personal projects and relationships play in everyday decision-making. On this approach, normative analysis of the limits of legitimate partiality begins from a rich empirical dataset of real-life decision-making. We do not assume that the decisions that people make or the reasoning that they use to justify them are morally correct. We recognise the likelihood of special pleading but we aim to develop moral theory that can help us to distinguish this kind of special pleading from reasonable partiality.

The second *idealization* to avoid is that radically changing one's behaviour to avoid contributing to climate change is always something that one can do. The assumption of the autonomous moral agent who always has the volitional capacity to reduce their emissions is not consistent with our best accounts of human psychology. We know that human behaviour is often habitual and that it is embedded in social practices (Gifford 2011, Lichtenberg 2014). Humans are not rational agents, who decide what to do and then unfailingly do it. It often takes time, effort and strategic action to change one's habits. It is even more difficult to change our behaviours when the social or economic context or the physical infrastructure supports our existing behaviours (and we see little evidence that other people are changing their behaviours) (Lorenzoni et al 2007). Climate ethicists (and climate activists) who argue that individuals are morally required to radically change their behaviour may be guilty of attributing to us volitional capacities that we do not have. Climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility encourages us to take seriously the realities of human psychology. We hear first-person accounts of the constraints and challenges that prevent pro-climate behaviours and we use normative analysis, which draws on relevant background theories, to assess whether they justify or excuse what people do. Of course, we will encounter another form of special pleading – some people will exaggerate the difficulty or cost of overcoming the constraints and challenges that they face. However, normative analysis, as we understand it, aims to distinguish this form of special pleading from the recognition of genuine obstacles that justify or excuse our behaviour.

The third *idealization* to avoid is that each of us has the cognitive capacities to accurately discern what he or she should do about climate change. The assumption of cognitive competence in such a morally and empirically complex area of ethics is not consistent with what we know about the limits of human reasoning (Whitmarsh et al 2011). We know, for example, that calculating the emissions associated with different actions is likely to be extremely complex. We often do not fully understand the consequences – for others or for ourselves – of the options available to us. We have limited time – and often limited skills – to check the information and advice that we receive. We use heuristics that may lead us astray (Sunstein 2006). Moreover, we operate in a context where misinformation is common, which leads to additional uncertainty and scepticism (van der Linden et al 2017). In sum, there is a danger of attributing to us cognitive capacities that we do not have. Climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility encourages us to take seriously the limits of human information processing and decision-making. Our data includes first-person accounts of the challenges of acquiring, verifying and processing information (and uncertainties) about the consequences of our actions. We use normative analysis, which draws on relevant background theories, to assess whether the considerations that people identify justify or excuse what they do. Again, we know that we will encounter special pleading – some people will exaggerate the significance of the informational or cognitive challenges that they face. However, we aim to use normative analysis to distinguish this form of special pleading from genuine cognitive limits that justify or excuse our behaviour.

In this section, we have argued that it is important for climate ethics to avoid *idealization*. Climate ethics should be for people *here and now*; not for hypothetical agents that are radically different from *real* people. We have suggested that climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility might help us to avoid *idealization* because it forces us to engage directly with the first-person accounts that people offer to justify or explain their behaviour.

6. Pilot study: Collecting data

We have proposed that climate ethics might benefit from fieldwork with an ethnographic sensibility, which generates a broad range of real-life cases for normative analysis. In Section 7, we will draw on data from a pilot study that we have conducted to illustrate how normative analysis of ethnographic data can contribute to theory development in climate ethics. In this section, we describe the method that we used to collect the data.

First-person accounts of ordinary moral thinking about everyday actions, choices and circumstances might be collected using a range of data collection methods, including interviews, focus groups, diaries, and observation. We used an approach that combines interviews and diaries. This approach enables us to reflect with our research participants on the real-life situations and choices that they face. We recruited 27 UK-based participants through social media.[8] We arranged an initial interview with each participant. At this interview, we collected three types of data: information on personal circumstances; a 'thick' description of lifestyle choices and behaviours; and an account of attitudes to climate change.[9]

At the end of the initial interview, we introduced participants to an on-line diary tool and showed them how to make diary entries.[10] The diary entries provide us with an insight into how participants thought about some of the choices that they made. The diary method gave participants the opportunity to select their own topics and reflect on them in their own time without interviewer prompts.

After a participant had completed their two-week diary, we conducted a follow-up interview with them. We asked each participant to reflect further on some of the situations and choices that we

[8] We used a very short on-line survey promoted to a wide range of groups on social media using the headline, "How hard is it to save the world?" In the advertisement, we explained the project and what we wanted research participants to do and we asked for volunteers. We used the survey to collect some basic demographic data – specifically, gender, age, occupation, income, education and location – to identify and recruit participants whose circumstances were likely to vary in ways that might be morally interesting (Büchs and Schnepf 2013). However, our aim was not to recruit a representative sample of the population – or even of a subset of the population – but rather, in accordance with the ethnographic sensibility we have adopted, to develop a series of qualitative case studies of real people talking about their ordinary moral decisions.
Our on-line survey was completed by 254 people between 22nd January and 17th August 2018. Of these, 159 people volunteered to take part in the project. We selected 36 participants for the study, of whom 27 completed all three parts of the project.

[9] We were interested in personal circumstances that might have a significant effect on an individual's life by influencing the opportunities, constraints and incentive structures in which they make choices. We explored the behaviours of research participants by asking them to talk about what they did during a 'typical day', how that varies from day-to-day, and asking them to tell us about significant events and purchases over the last year or planned for the coming year. Finally, we asked participants to tell us what they thought about climate change.

[10] We asked them to make between seven and fourteen diary entries over two weeks reflecting on something that they had done or not done. We kept the number of diary entries quite low to promote completion. Future studies might experiment with research designs that demand more from participants in order to collect even more detailed accounts.

had identified from analysis of their initial interview and their diary entries. Our aim was to explore in more depth their reasoning and their feelings about the situations and choices that they faced.[11]

The empirical data that we have collected tells us about the moral thinking of real people who have been encouraged to reflect on their actions and choices. We do not assume that the data tells us what a conscientious moral agent *should* do in the circumstances of our participants. Instead, we use it as a starting point for normative analysis. Our dataset provides the raw material for the development of case studies that we use as intuition pumps.[12]

7. Illustration: Air travel and personal relationships

In this section, we illustrate how adopting an ethnographic sensibility can contribute to theory development in climate ethics. One of the 'actions' that we asked all of our participants about was travelling by aeroplane. Air travel is currently responsible for approximately 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions, with this predicted to rise to between 15%–40% by 2050 (Alcock 2017, 136). In addition, airborne emissions 'may be between a confirmed minimum of 1.9 and up to 5.1 times as harmful' as surface-based emissions, due to the altitude at which they are released (Gossling et al 2007, 225). While scheduled flights carried 3.7 billion air passengers in 2016 (ICAO 2017), it has been suggested that less than 18% of the global population have actually travelled by plane in their lifetime (Mandyck 2016). Air travel might be regarded as a 'luxury' that is enjoyed only by the more affluent. However, there is good empirical evidence that people who travel by air are extremely reluctant to reduce their air travel (Alcock 2017, Barr et al 2010, Becken 2007) and even some of the most environmentally conscious individuals consider flying to be a necessary part of their lives (Barr et al 2011). Is this special pleading or are there contextual factors that justify or excuse flying?

In our data, we have approximately 31000 words of interview transcriptions and diary entries that we coded as 'flying'. Our research participants offered various justifications for flying, including work, holiday, new experiences, and seeing friends and family. They often explained their decision to fly by arguing that other travel options were not feasible because they were too time-consuming or too expensive. They claimed that their circumstances, including the demands on their time, the transport infrastructure, and their economic context, made flying the only option. There are many aspects of these accounts that merit normative analysis. In our future work, we plan to explore these issues, as well as undertaking a normative analysis of justifications for various other consumption behaviours. In this section, we focus on one kind of justification for air travel: the role of personal

[11] We recognise that some participants will have provided what they believed to be socially acceptable accounts. However, our aim is to see what we can learn by considering whether the actions they describe are morally permissible for someone in the circumstances that they describe. If they have misrepresented either their actions or their circumstances, our moral judgements will be about a 'hypothetical' rather than a 'real' case. We believe that these 'hypothetical' cases are likely to be close enough to 'real' cases to retain many of the benefits that we set out in the previous sections.

[12] We have used two approaches to the data to select case studies for development. The first approach is wholly intuitive. We have carefully reviewed the data to identify what we believe are interesting moral problems. Using this approach, we have identified cases that raise interesting questions about individual responsibility for climate change in real-life situations. The second approach is more systematic. We developed a coding framework for the interview data and the diary entries. The coding framework reflected the purposes of the research and was refined in light of repeated reading of the data. The basic elements of the coding framework were actions, circumstances, and justifications for action or excusing conditions. We tried to code using participants' own language rather than imposing categories from the literature. Using this approach, we were able to identify both commonalities and contrasts between participants' circumstances, choices and moral reasoning. As a result, we were able to develop case studies that raise different moral issues.

relationships in justifying air travel. We use this example to demonstrate the potential of climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility.

The value of personal relationships is central to discussions of reasonable partiality and may be seen as setting limits on what can be reasonably demanded in climate ethics (e.g., Baatz 2014). However, the existing literature does not explore the role or the limits of personal relationship justifications for greenhouse gas emissions. We believe that normative analysis of our data sheds new light on these issues. More specifically, we aim to make two substantive contributions to climate ethics. First, we offer the first normative analysis of the most obvious personal relationship justification for air travel, namely, that it is necessary to visit relatives in other countries. Second, we critically examine two arguments for not using alternative modes of transport rather than flying, namely that they cost too much and take too much time.

The most obvious personal relationship justification for air travel is that seeing relatives or friends in other countries depends on air travel. Research participants made this claim about relatives in various countries, including Ireland, Jersey, Germany, Sweden, Australia and the United States. In many cases, research participants were travelling by air between one and three times each year to visit close relatives, mostly parents, parents-in-law, siblings or children and grandchildren. Some participants expressed regret about flying but they considered it a necessity rather than something that was optional. We can interpret this sense of necessity in, at least, two different ways. On the first interpretation, they understood themselves as under a special moral obligation to visit their relatives. This obligation outweighed, trumped or excluded the moral reasons that they had to limit their greenhouse gas emissions. On the second interpretation, they understood seeing their relatives as a necessary part of a loving relationship that was central to their lives. They could not consider foregoing their visit even if they regretted that they had to fly.

Moral theorists have defended moral obligations grounded in personal relationships as well as the immunity of personal relationships from impartial moral reasoning (Williams 1973). However, the appropriateness of using these arguments to justify visiting relatives has not been examined. Do either of these arguments justify the claim that visiting is necessary? Specifically, is there a moral obligation to visit close relatives? Or, is visiting close relatives a necessary part of having a loving relationship with them? We believe that normative analysis of our data can help us to understand the role that these arguments might play in justifying air travel.

Consider the following exceptional case: Anne was the only participant who reported that she had close relatives overseas but refused to fly for environmental reasons.[13] Anne told us that she had not seen her US-based daughter for four years, had seen her grandchildren only once and had refused to attend her son's wedding in Greece because she would not fly. Her contact with her US-based daughter and grandchildren was through Facebook. Anne traces her environmental commitments back to childhood and insists that she is not prepared to compromise her beliefs. *Prima facie*, we could all follow Anne's example. This suggests that a personal relationship 'justification' for flying should be understood as special pleading rather than legitimate partiality. However, we want to argue that careful normative analysis of Anne's case might lead us to other conclusions. In particular, we want to make two observations.

First, we believe that the history of how Anne and her daughter came to be on opposite sides of the Atlantic is important. Anne's daughter left the UK over twenty years ago to study in the United States and then subsequently got a job, married and had children in the United States. Anne's environmental commitments were already longstanding when her daughter emigrated and she remembers explicitly telling her daughter that she would not be flying to the United States to visit her because of those commitments. In these particular circumstances, it would seem unreasonably demanding to claim that Anne has a moral obligation to her daughter to visit her in the United

[13] We have used pseudonyms for our research participants.

States. This suggests that the obligation to visit relatives overseas, if it exists at all, might be dependent on the historical context, including, for example, who made the decision to move overseas (and why they made that decision), what both parties said at the time, and what each party might reasonably have expected based on their previous relationship and understanding of the other's commitments. We believe that further normative work is necessary to establish whether there is ever an obligation to visit and to consider the contours and limits of that obligation.

Second, Anne's case might also shed light on the claim that visiting relatives is a necessary part of a loving relationship. Anne has foregone personal contact with and participation in major events in her children's and grandchildren's lives. She appears to have made a significant personal sacrifice for the sake of her environmental commitments. Anne's relationship with her children and grandchildren might not be as 'close' as it could have been. Is this a sacrifice that people should be morally required to make? Our (provisional) moral intuition about this case is that Anne's action is supererogatory: she makes a sacrifice that she is not morally required to make for the sake of the greater good. If that is correct, the 'loving relationship' argument might justify visiting. However, there is no reason to believe that it justifies an unlimited number of visits. Further normative analysis of ethnographic data might be combined with relevant background theories from social psychology and related disciplines to develop a better understanding of the detailed implications and limits of the 'loving relationship' argument for visiting.

Let us assume that further work leads us to the conclusion that personal relationship arguments can justify visiting relatives overseas. We might remain unconvinced that they justify flying. As we noted earlier, many of our research participants chose to fly because they believed that other modes of travel were too expensive or too time-consuming. Consider the case of Roger who flies to Ireland once or twice each year to visit his wife's parents and siblings. Roger told us that it is much more expensive for him to drive from his home in Manchester to Hollyhead, take the ferry, and drive to the South West of Ireland than it is to fly direct from Manchester. It is also much quicker to fly. The journey takes at least twelve hours by car and ferry but much less by plane. Roger and his wife do go by car and ferry sometimes because he is keen to avoid flying but this is usually when they are staying for longer. If they only have a limited amount of time, they have to fly. Roger gives the specific example of visiting at New Year when they will have a limited amount of time between visiting his family in Northampton at Christmas and going back to work in early January.

Roger's case suggests several directions for normative analysis. We want to focus on two questions. First, when, if ever, does the higher price of an alternative mode of transport justify flying to visit relatives? Roger talked about the higher costs of travelling by car and ferry but he was still willing to do it sometimes. More generally, he suggested that he was willing to do the 'right thing' so long as it was not 'too extortionate'.[14] However, he also said 'I can't blame people for choosing the cheaper option' and suggested that 'the incentives should be the other way round'. Roger's willingness to pay more to avoid flying contrasts with his view that others should not be blamed for choosing to fly for economic reasons. Is it unreasonable to demand that people should pay more to avoid flying? Is Roger's own position supererogatory?

The lack of government action to regulate flying or subsidise 'greener' modes of transport to ensure that the relative prices do not encourage flying would seem to be a significant moral and political failure. Moreover, in a culture that promotes 'bargain hunting', it may be psychologically difficult for people to voluntarily choose the more expensive option. So, *prima facie* the price structure and prevailing cultural norms might excuse those who choose the cheaper option. The moral failure lies with the government rather than individuals. However, we believe this argument is too quick. We agree that the pricing structure and prevailing cultural norms are excusing conditions but it is a further question whether they are (jointly) sufficient to excuse flying. It is likely to be easy to

[14] The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the interviews with Roger.

exaggerate the psychological difficulty of paying the extra to avoid flying. Of course, the extra cost of flying will be more significant for those with a smaller budget. So, the combination of pricing structure, budget constraint, and cultural norms might sometimes be sufficient to excuse flying to visit relatives but we should beware of special pleading. Further normative analysis of similar cases might help us to develop more fine-grained judgements about the relative moral significance of different combinations of excusing conditions.

The second question that Roger's case prompts is: when, if ever, does the additional time needed to use an alternative mode of transport justify flying to visit relatives? This is the principal reason that Roger gives for flying. However, normatively, we might regard it as a weak justification. Why should saving a few hours be more important than avoiding the harmful emissions associated with flying? Roger's example of visiting at New Year seems to suggest the time constraints are such that flying is the only way they can visit his and his wife's families during the Christmas holiday period. So, if we were to assume that both visits were morally justified and that Roger is correct that they are not both possible without flying, *prima facie* flying would be justified. However, there are several 'hidden' assumptions in this argument that require further investigation. We want to draw attention to two of them.

First, Roger's argument depends on the claim that he and his wife need to return to work early in the New Year. However, we might ask: could they have taken additional annual leave in early January to allow them more time to visit his wife's parents? The 'additional time' argument, like the 'extra cost' argument, depends on a relevant budget constraint – i.e., a genuine limit on the time available for visiting. The temporal constraints that work, school and other organised activities impose on us can be excusing conditions but we should beware of people exaggerating the 'hardness' or inflexibility of the constraints that they face to justify flying to visit relatives.[15] The second 'hidden' assumption in Roger's argument is that it is necessary to visit both families during the Christmas period. We might accept that 'personal relationship' arguments can justify visiting but question the claim that Christmas visits are necessary. It is possible that the prevailing cultural norms or the norms and expectations within a family could make it necessary to visit on some special occasions, such as Christmas, weddings, or 'significant' birthdays, but further normative analysis of such cases might help us to develop more fine-grained judgements about when special occasion visits are necessary.

In this section, we have presented a preliminary normative analysis of two cases based on the data from our pilot study. We believe that our analysis illustrates some of the potential benefits of using case studies based on ethnographic data: the cases are realistic because they are based on research participants' accounts of their circumstances and reasons for action; they are more detailed than many hypothetical examples (and can be made even more detailed by drawing on additional interview data or asking further questions in future research); and they can cover a broad range of circumstances, experiences and justifications for action, which can be further extended through additional empirical work with different research participants in different countries.[16] Approaching climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility can help us to develop a rich ethics of personal consumption responsibilities that is genuinely relevant for people living in very different circumstances *today* because it takes seriously real people's experiences and their limitations.

[15] Further elaboration of our argument might draw on relevant background theories, such as work in psychology that seeks to explain how perceived constraints limit (pro-environmental) behaviour (Ajzen 1991).
[16] As we saw in Section 3, the best hypothetical examples do provide some level of detail. Moreover, it is possible to add more detail to hypothetical examples. However, the selection of details for hypothetical cases may be arbitrary or skewed to the experiences or reading of the climate ethicist. The hypothetical approach to case development seems less likely to generate the broad range of realistic cases that might be developed from a well-designed programme of ethnographic studies.

8. Conclusion

We have proposed climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility as a new approach to thinking about personal consumption responsibilities. Our argument develops the suggestion that what can reasonably be demanded of individuals is context-sensitive. Our approach uses real cases, developed using qualitative social science data, as intuition pumps for normative analysis. We argued that our approach has two major advantages over the standard approach. First, it allows for more systematic discussion of a broader range of cases, which are informed by social research rather than the limited experience or imagination of climate ethicists. Second, it provides a more realistic account of the moral (as well as the economic, social and cultural) circumstances that people face here and now so that we are better able to avoid idealizations that compromise the practical relevance of climate ethics.

We illustrated our approach with two cases drawn from our pilot study. Our normative analysis of Anne's and Roger's cases helped us to better understand some of the contextual factors that are relevant to judging when travelling by air to visit relatives might be justified (or excusable). For example, we argued that the 'loving relationships' argument will sometimes justify visiting relatives overseas. However, it will only justify flying if it is supplemented by another argument that shows that it is unreasonable to demand that people use alternative modes of transport to visit their relatives. We highlighted the potential for special pleading about both the extra cost and the additional time that might be incurred by using other modes of transport but we concluded that there may be some combinations of excusing conditions that (jointly) excuse flying to visit relatives. In such circumstances, the best background theories of people's psychological or volitional capacity will support the claim that it is unreasonable to demand that they refrain from flying.

Our illustration is very narrowly focussed. We have discussed one personal relationship justification for air travel. Our discussion of that justification remains radically incomplete and we have suggested various directions in which it might be developed to 'deepen' our understanding of when it provides a legitimate justification for flying. However, we hope that our illustration shows the potential of climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility. The data from our pilot study suggests other personal relationship justifications for air travel (e.g., avoiding conflict when one's partner is keen to travel or ensuring that one's children experience other cultures) that might also be subjected to normative analysis. It also suggests other kinds of justifications for air travel (e.g., work or holidays) as well as justifications for a wide range of other emissions-generating behaviours. More generally, the data that we have is only from a small pilot study. More data can be collected to aid with the systematic exploration of our personal consumption responsibilities. We believe that this programme of work can significantly enhance our understanding of personal consumption responsibilities.

In this article, we have focussed on personal consumption responsibilities. However, the question 'What can reasonably be demanded?' is not only relevant for personal consumption responsibilities. We face the same question when we consider individual political responsibilities. What political action on climate change can reasonably be demanded from each of us? What role should different contextual factors play in our moral thinking about individual political responsibilities? Climate ethics with an ethnographic sensibility can help us to deepen our understanding of individual political responsibilities and, in particular, to think carefully about how to avoid both special pleading and idealizations that exaggerate our capacities. The approach that we are advocating might also be adopted beyond climate ethics. There are many other issues in contemporary ethics (e.g., labour exploitation, global poverty, gender inequality) where we can ask, 'What should *you* or *I* do about X?' In each of these cases, we face questions about what can reasonably be demanded from individuals in the context of the failure of governments.

The idea that underpins our approach is that individual responsibilities for global challenges are context-sensitive. There are some actions that it might be reasonable to demand from *me* but not reasonable to demand from *you* (and vice-versa). Each of us has different responsibilities because our different contexts justify or excuse different behaviours. If we reject idealising assumptions about the capacities of all moral agents, we find that the *real* differences between people's circumstances justify different conclusions about what we can reasonably demand from them. The global picture of the distribution of moral responsibilities that emerges from this account merits further investigation. We believe that our approach allows us to investigate what the most serious moral failures are and who is responsible for them. We think it may also lead to the conclusion that the serious moral failure of a few moral agents who are well-positioned to create circumstances that are more conducive to harm-avoidance or harm-prevention behaviours may excuse many people from some moral responsibilities. In different circumstances, we might reasonably demand more from people. In the context of the ongoing moral failure of the few, we may be dependent on people doing more than they can be morally required to do to prevent global harms. *You* and *I* may not have a moral responsibility to 'save the world' but it would be a supererogatory thing for us to do.

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