

Ethical consumption and carbon emissions

Utilising the 'great event heuristic'

Professor Bernward Gesang of the University of Mannheim, Germany, has published numerous contributions to the field of ethical consumer decision-making. He considers how best an individual can contribute to the greater good in protecting the planet from carbon emissions, through personal and consumer choices. He applies a normative theoretical framework, utilising the insights of consequentialism and utilitarianism, to examine whether individuals can make a difference through individual or collective consumer decisions. He concludes that the commonly advised strategy for individual climate protection is not the most effective one.

The realities of climate change and a warming planet continue to be experienced daily around the world, from extreme weather events involving flooding, droughts, and wildfires, to melting glaciers, ocean acidification, and the destruction of habitats. Globally, more and more people witness, document, and scramble to survive these changes. It becomes vital to ask: is there something individuals can do to stall the heating of the planet, or should it be left to politicians, governments, and corporations to protect the earth? What are the ways in which an individual can make a difference to protecting the earth for current and future generations? These are the vital questions that Professor Bernward Gesang of the University of Mannheim, Germany, addresses in his work on the climate crisis.

The commonly advised strategy for climate protection – reducing one's individual CO₂ emissions by way of lifestyle changes – is not the most effective one, he argues. Donations to special charities might be more efficient, and not simply a trade of indulgences.

How effective are individual decisions given the broader failure of states to protect environmental interests?

INDIVIDUAL CONSUMPTION AND EMISSIONS

Some people hold that the focus on individual behavioural changes is misleading, because duties regarding climate protection should not be addressed to the individual. What, however, are we to do if states refuse to do their job? The job is too important, as it were, to remain undone. Therefore, we need to ask: what can the individual do to support the state so that the mountain of problems does not become insolubly high? Gesang's answer is: choose the most efficient means available and maintain motivation to help.

The standard answer, however, is different. It suggests individuals should make choices every day about which products to consume in their activities of daily living. The carbon footprint or emissions associated with consuming products – such as meat and dairy, car travel, or heating a home – are therefore increasingly being calculated and reduced. Gesang highlights that the mainstream view is that individual changes in emissions behaviour can make a decisive

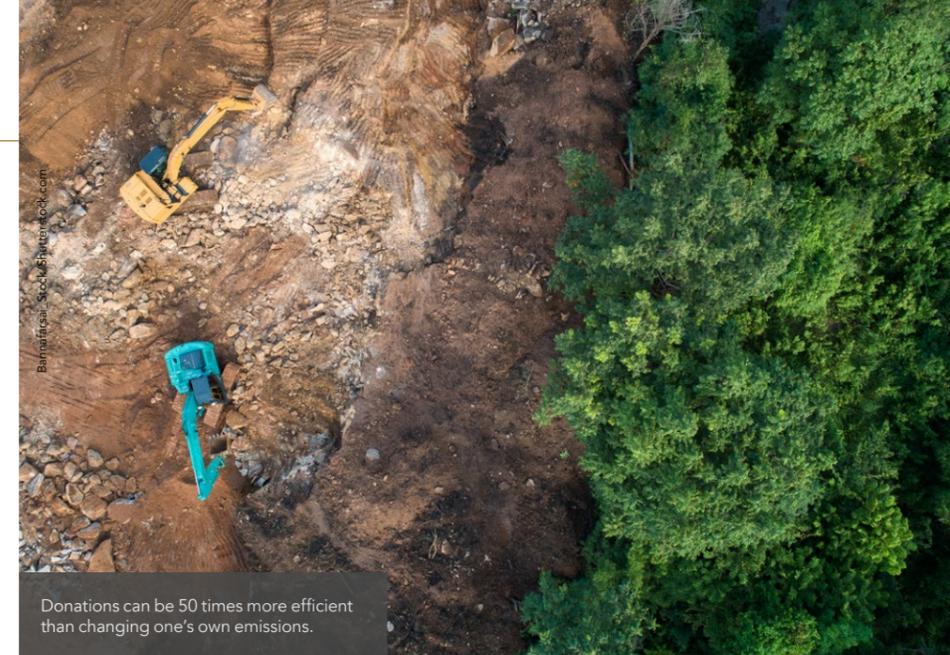
difference, yet he provides a far more nuanced picture.

He explains that, while it may be true that an individual's consumer choices can perhaps make a difference, individuals may not always be motivated to change their entrenched patterns of consumption. People may argue, for example, that the purchase of one item may make a negligible difference, and that decisive collective action is required to truly turn the tide. Or they argue that conscious consumption decisions require too much information and this overwhelms the individual. Gesang debates this question of whether many purchase decisions/emission actions make a difference cumulatively and whether single individual actions make a difference, using a normative framework of consequentialism.

CONSEQUENCES OF INDIVIDUAL CHOICE

Gesang explains that consequentialism is an ethical framework that considers morality to be directly linked to the real-world consequences of actions, rather than the intention of an action. Put most simply, if an action produces no negative consequences, it may not be considered unethical. There is, however, a line of thought proffered by moral philosophers such as Peter Singer and Shelley Kagan, which seeks to position individual actions within a context of a chain of larger actions where cumulative effects eventually trigger a negative consequence. Thus, while a consumer may think or argue that their purchase of a single chicken, for example, may not make a difference, Kagan holds that each individual purchase of a single chicken could trigger a threshold, where producers decide to increase the overall number of chickens produced for sale.

The harm generated when individuals become actors in a chain, which subsequently triggers a threshold and results in a negative consequence, could thus be considered morally unacceptable in terms of the individual's action.



Donations can be 50 times more efficient than changing one's own emissions.

Gesang argues, however, that there are other factors which are not always considered within what can become a slightly myopic line of argument. For example, in the EU, the Common Agricultural Policy directs and influences the supply of products. Considerations impacting on this policy extend beyond environmental protection to include food safety, animal health and welfare, and living standards of farmers; these policies may have a greater influence on decisions about subsidies that ultimately influence

meat production, in Kagan's example, and CO₂ emissions. Thus, an individual's consumer choices may have less impact on the farmer's meat production decisions than might agricultural policy which is made independent of fluctuating market influences.

INTRODUCING THE 'GREAT EVENT HEURISTIC'

Gesang argues that proponents of consequentialism like Kagan or Singer often focus on miniscule contributions to outcomes rather than considering how to maximise positive outcomes for society. Calculations of expected utility (put very simply, using an equation that looks something like: benefit size multiplied by the probability of occurrence) are often entirely unable to prove that individuals' minor actions have any significant impact.

Individuals who make monetary donations towards a charity that supports farmers in a rainforest may achieve a greater positive outcome than by calculating their CO₂ emissions when undertaking a car journey.



Conscious consumption is suspected of having only a symbolic effect.

In addition, for consumers to focus on how their contributions may trigger a threshold that results in negative outcomes can also become highly complicated, inhibiting their desire to act. Alternately, these individual actions run the risk of being symbolic or performative, with little real-world benefit. Gesang proposes that a more expedient and nuanced approach might be to adopt a framework indebted to utilitarianism, where the focus is on which consumer choices deliver the greatest positive outcome for society.



Adopting a 'utility maximiser' enables individuals to focus on decisions which will make the greatest difference.

**SAVE
THE PLANET**

By applying a 'utility maximiser', individuals can focus on positive outcomes and values that make the greatest difference. As a comparative example, Gesang says we know that a greater difference is made when i) a starving person is provided with food for a month, than ii) when 1,000 workers in Germany are paid one cent extra an hour for their work over a month, or iii) when they aren't. One can quickly estimate large differences, while small differences are difficult and can only be estimated with a high margin of error. Instead of looking at the exact difference between two options, ii) and iii), that are close to each other, one should look for a third option, i), that clearly exceeds the benefit of the other two. This simple insight finds little entry into our decision-making, as Gesang demonstrates with many examples. Adopting this utility-maximising heuristic for evaluating ethical decisions in consumption goes some way towards simplifying the hugely complex process of ethical decision-making. By applying what he terms the 'great event heuristic', a more ethical and broadly positive outcome can be achieved by individuals.

Importantly, the great event heuristic enables us to re-evaluate the problems of collective action and can help us work towards ascertaining the most environmentally advantageous course of action. For example, individuals who make monetary donations towards a charity that supports farmers in a rainforest, may achieve a greater positive

outcome through this action than by calculating their individual emissions contributions when undertaking a car journey. An individual consumer prevents 450kg of CO₂ emissions by refraining from eating meat for a whole year. This might save one 650 dollars, sacrificed for climate protection, if they renounce meat, compared to what they would usually eat.

For the same financial renunciation, you could relieve the climate burden

Gesang argues that individuals can make a more benevolent impact through targeted donations, through political engagement, and through making conscious but low-cost consumption decisions.

with far greater efficacy. Donating this amount of money on behalf of climate protection projects in the developing world may result in a reduction of 28.300kg of CO₂ emissions. There would be an immediate positive impact for the farmer in the rainforest, who could be directly helped with an incoming donation, without the intervention of cooperation partners. The farmers might additionally feel less compelled to sell community land to a large corporation (who, in turn, might feasibly have the malignant intention of felling trees in the forest for profit).

If the deforestation were to take place, it would have a greater direct and cumulative impact on carbon emissions, climate change, and the destruction of diverse species living in the forest. This line of argument reminds one of the notion of indulgence, against which Gesang argues at length. He mainly points out that it is not a matter of compensation – making up for the damages incurred in the same degree – but a request for donations that far exceeds this measure.

Using this 'great event heuristic' reasoning when making consumer decisions provides a rule of thumb for decision-making that is easier for individuals to work with, than would be the case for an individual trying to change their consumption behaviours. These changes can be experienced as burdensome by individuals and may inhibit the action needed to protect the planet.

Gesang argues that individuals can make a more benevolent impact through targeted donations, through political engagement, and through making conscious but low-cost consumption decisions, such as, for example, installing the search engine Ecosia, which uses its revenues for reforestation.

These decisions may thus have a greater positive impact than might be the case if an individual were to reduce their car journeys to reduce their CO₂ emissions. This reduction may have less impact on oil production, which is another example of a politically distorted market, similar in some regards to the meat market. In conclusion, Gesang argues that ethical consumption decisions can go beyond focusing on an individual's emissions behaviour, to focusing on the greater good that can be achieved when individuals and companies make strategic choices to fight poverty and climate change.



Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

Professor Bernward Gesang considers how best an individual can contribute to the greater good in protecting the planet from carbon emissions, through personal and consumer choices.

Detail

Bio

After gaining his PhD from Munster in 1994, Professor Gesang lectured at the University of Zürich, Switzerland, from 2002 to 2003, and since 2005 has been a lecturer at the University of Basel, Switzerland. Since summer 2009 he has also held the Chair of Philosophy and Ethics of Economy at the University of Mannheim, Germany.



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Personal Response

Generally, do consumers make more ethical decisions once they understand the impact of their decisions?

// They do, if they are not overcharged at the same time. My strategy is to avoid this, because we see from the German eco-tax that paying more is easier than changing behaviour. If you make it not too easy and donate enough, it becomes a win-win option: the most efficient means is chosen and motivation to help is maintained. But we can only pursue this strategy for a limited time, until the efficient options in the Global South are exhausted. Individuals (but not politics) can wait that long to use more demanding means, hoping that technology will advance in the meantime and offer easier methods. //

