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ARTICLES

Climate Esoteric Morality and the Problem of Inconsequentialism

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Abstract
Climate change is to a large extent a collective action problem, but many believe that individual action is also required. But what if no individual contribution to climate change is necessary nor sufficient to cause climate change-induced harms? This issue is known as the problem of *inconsequentialism*. It is particularly problematic for act consequentialism because the theory does not seem to judge such inconsequential contributions negatively. In this paper, we apply Henry Sidgwick's idea of esoteric morality to climate change and assess whether what we call a *climate esoteric morality* could help to deal with the problem of inconsequentialism from an act consequentialist perspective. Consequentialists ought then to promote what we call nonconsequentialist *faux principles*; exaggerate existing consequentialist principles that *pro tanto* forbid contributing to climate change whenever strictly consequentialist principles fail to do so; and refrain from criticising nonconsequentialist principles that forbid contributing to climate change.

Keywords: Climate change; Consequentialism; Esoteric morality; Climate ethics; Inconsequentialism

1. Introduction

Climate change is arguably one of the most dangerous and urgent problems that humanity is facing and is incredibly difficult to tackle. It has an elusive and complex nature with temporally and globally dispersed causes and effects, and has fittingly been characterised as a 'perfect moral storm' (Gardiner 2011a). Further, almost everything people do contributes to it somehow, as nearly all everyday activities cause greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Consequently, everyday routines that are not normally perceived as harmful or morally questionable have become so, and have been dubbed 'new harms' (Lichtenberg 2010). However, no individual contribution to climate change seems necessary or sufficient to cause it, nor is it clear that they translate to any tangible harm. From a certain perspective, no one is responsible for one of the most dangerous and urgent problems that human societies face (Gardiner 2011b; Jamieson 1992).

This is particularly problematic for consequentialism, because if no particular contribution to climate change has any expected negative effects on anyone,

consequentialism does not judge those contributions negatively. Even worse, if the activities causing climate change are somehow otherwise beneficial, it would be wrong not to do them, because the harm–benefit analysis would always favour acting despite the contribution to climate change (Jamieson 2007). In the climate ethics literature, this problem is known as the problem of *inconsequentialism* (see e.g., Sandberg 2011; Sandler 2010). Inconsequentialism states that a reduction of one's individual GHG emissions cannot be expected to have any morally significant effect on climate change-induced harms. Therefore, a consequentialist stance does not require it. While not everyone agrees with this view (e.g., Broome 2019; Hiller 2011; Lawford-Smith 2016; Morgan-Knapp and Goodman 2015), it has generated much discussion and is worth considering.

It seems to be possible to solve this problem on nonconsequentialist moral grounds (see e.g., Baatz 2014; Hourdequin 2010; Sandler 2010). This is an important capability for a moral theory, because a failure to respond to global threats such as climate change could be considered a serious flaw (Gardiner 2011a: 217–18). Thus, other normative theories seem to have an edge over consequentialism in this regard. Moreover, inconsequentialism is particularly awkward for consequentialism because consequentialism is a theory that highlights the importance of good consequences, yet following it may in this case lead collectively to very dire consequences. So, if an individual's GHG emissions do not cause any morally significant harm to anyone, and if the emitting activity has positive value to the individual, then they do not have any climate-change-related moral reason to refrain from it, all things considered. For instance, a pleasurable Sunday drive (see Sinnott-Armstrong 2005) emits some GHGs, but seemingly not enough to cause anyone any harm in expectation, so from a consequentialist perspective one should at least be allowed to take the drive in spite of climate change (Budolfson 2019; Cullity 2015; Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong 2018). But since this applies to everyone, the collectively emitted GHGs seem to lead to overall net bad consequences, since the overall good effects of emitting activities for the individuals do not seem to outweigh the overall bad effects of climate change. Thus, there are strong consequentialist reasons to mitigate climate change, so consequentialists should in general be very concerned about climate change and its many adverse effects and be well motivated to tackle it.

This poses no problem for rule consequentialism, which posits rules that provide moral reasons to act individually to solve collective action problems. Indeed, rule consequentialism states that acts are required or forbidden if they obey a set of rules that, if generally internalised, 'in the long run and on the whole' are expected to yield consequences at least as good as any other set of rules (Hooker 2016: 4; Mulgan 2005: 3; Salvat 2020: 3). Applied to climate change, this stance is consistent with a requirement that individuals reduce their GHG emissions regardless of whether they make an expected morally relevant difference or not. However, act and rule consequentialism are rival moral theories, and both should be assessed independently of their application to climate change. Here is not the place to do so. Since act consequentialism remains popular among the different strands of consequentialism, it deserves attention and is our focus here.

In this paper, we assess whether Henry Sidgwick's idea of esoteric morality (Sidgwick 1981) could be applied to the case of climate change, and if what we call a *climate esoteric morality* could be a candidate for dealing with the problem of inconsequentialism from an act-consequentialist perspective.[1] An aspect of esoteric morality

[1]From here on, we use the words "consequentialism", "consequentialist", and "nonconsequentialist", as synonyms for "act consequentialism", "act consequentialist" and "non-act consequentialist", respectively.

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states that sometimes one is permitted or even required to conceal one's true moral beliefs and advocate moral principles one does not believe in. From this view, it would follow that consequentialists ought to promote what we term nonconsequentialist *faux principles* and exaggerate existing consequentialist principles that *pro tanto* forbid contributing to climate change whenever strictly consequentialist principles fail to do so. Moreover, consequentialists ought to refrain from criticising nonconsequentialist principles that forbid contributing to climate change. In this paper, our main aim is to show that this kind of climate esoteric morality provides a tool for consequentialism to tackle the problem of inconsequentialism. In short, if following consequentialist principles individually leads to a collective failure to mitigate climate change because of inconsequentialism, and if consequentialism has internal justifications to promoting faux principles, exaggerating consequentialist principles, and refraining from criticising nonconsequentialist principles via esoteric morality, then consequentialism has the resources for overcoming the problem of inconsequentialism by motivating people to reduce their GHG emissions *despite* inconsequentialism, if true. Thus, with climate esoteric morality, an act consequentialist has the means to tackle inconsequentialism by promoting climate change mitigation even if it does not make any expected moral difference, individually.

We argue that esoteric morality is theoretically consistent and compatible with act consequentialism. This does not seem misplaced since it follows directly from and is consistent with consequentialist thinking. From a consequentialist point of view, esoteric morality is justified, like any other practice, if and only if it is expected to lead to best or good enough overall consequences. What we try to show is that an application of esoteric morality to the problem of inconsequentialism in the context of climate change can in certain circumstances lead to better consequences than leaving this problem undealt with. Moreover, esoteric morality comes from Sidgwick, a central figure for contemporary consequentialist thinking, placing it firmly in the consequentialist tradition.

However, climate esoteric morality faces major problems as well, which we discuss in turn. Taking these problems seriously is important, because otherwise climate esoteric morality cannot be a viable tool for act consequentialism to respond to inconsequentialism, leaving consequentialism with a significant theoretical disadvantage over other normative ethical theories. Thus, the secondary aim of this paper is to show that climate esoteric morality is a viable strategy for tackling inconsequentialism, which is crucial for achieving its main aim.

The paper proceeds in three stages. First, we examine the problem of inconsequentialism in more detail. Then, we present the idea of climate esoteric morality as a way of dealing with it. Finally, we consider five objections against climate esoteric morality. We conclude that climate esoteric morality is able to tackle the problem of inconsequentialism, that there are no overriding theoretical obstacles to using climate esoteric morality, and that this move nevertheless comes with certain costs for consequentialism.

2. The problem of inconsequentialism in climate ethics

Important reductions in many individuals' GHG emissions have yet to be observed. It is estimated that to limit global warming to + 2 °C of pre-industrial temperatures by the end of this century, which is the Paris Agreement goal (UNFCCC 2015), the annual average individual carbon footprint should drop to about 2 tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO_2e) by 2050 (Wynes and Nicholas 2017). However, the current global

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average is around 6 tons (Hampton and Whitmarsh 2023), and a clear decreasing tendency does not yet show up (Ritchie and others 2023). Considering the moral desirability of mitigating climate change rapidly, this is problematic. Some authors have linked this inertia against effective climate action to psychological obstacles, such as the so-called grasping problem and the ensuing moral corruption, as well as moral disengagement (Gardiner 2006, 2011a: E; Peeters and others 2015, 2019). However, this could also be due to the arguably more serious problem of the (alleged) lack of morally relevant effects of any individual reduction of GHG emissions. This is the problem of inconsequentialism introduced above. In our view, the term might cover two different concepts which must be distinguished to deal properly with the problem at hand.

The concept that is usually discussed in the climate ethics literature is what we call

> **ontological inconsequentialism** (OI): individual emissions of GHGs make no expected morally relevant difference to climate-change-related harms.

OI, if true, could be explained by causal inefficacy, overdetermination, or indeterminacy (Hale 2022). Causal inefficacy means that the effects of individual emissions of GHGs would be too small to be morally significant (Sandler 2010). With overdetermination, individual emissions of GHGs are not even necessary to cause climate-change-related harms due to the current size of the collective carbon footprint (Barry and Øverland 2015). Indeterminacy means that it is simply impossible to foresee the good, bad, or neutral effects of individual behaviours that emit GHGs due to 'the confluence of complex social arrangements and the presence of intervening agents who act strategically' (Hale 2022: 250, see also 2011, 2020).

However one construes OI, if it is true, then no duty of reduction of individual emissions of GHGs can be grounded in an agent-neutral consequentialist perspective (Johnson 2003; Sandler 2010; Sinnott-Armstrong 2005).[2] Unsurprisingly, however, this leads to overall inaction and the failure of climate change mitigation – especially if all or most were consequentialists. This, again, seems problematic for consequentialism.

However, we argue that what is problematic for the purpose of climate change mitigation is not OI per se but what we call

> **doxastic inconsequentialism** (DI):[3] the belief that individual emissions of GHGs make no expected morally relevant difference to climate-change-related harms.

As the empirical literature suggests, DI – often referred to as feelings of helplessness and lack of individual control over the outcome – seems widespread and could be a major cause for the lack of individual reductions of GHG emissions (Gifford 2011; Gifford and Comeau 2011; Salomon and others 2017).

Now, one may well argue that because DI is the belief in OI, if it can be shown that OI is false, then DI will vanish and result in individual climate action (for technical debates, see Barry and Øverland 2015; Gunnemyr 2019; Lawford-Smith 2016).

[2]Note that according to Julia Nefsky, individuals could "help bring about" an outcome without making any difference to it, which would give them some reason – and an "imperfect obligation" (Nefsky 2021) – to act or omit acting even if their act of omission cannot or is extremely unlikely to make a difference (Nefsky 2017). Their view, however, does not seem to qualify as act consequentialist (Nefsky 2017: 2766–67), and is therefore not to be discussed here.

[3]We thank Dominic Roser for suggesting this terminology.

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However, we argue that questioning the truth of OI will likely not be an effective way of changing individual behaviours regarding climate change. First, the debate does not seem to be settled, and nothing tells us that it will someday be and that OI will be proven false. Second, and importantly, even if OI were to be proven false, and DI vanishes, a motivational gap might appear between moral judgement and behaviour (Peeters and others 2015: 4). Generally speaking, a motivational gap can be defined as the 'lack of motivation to comply with one's moral judgement' (Peeters and others 2015: 128). Even if the agent believes they have a moral reason to act or omit in a certain way, the motivational force of this reason is not strong enough to make them act or omit in that way. Here we draw on a specific instantiation:

> **motivational gap**: even when people believe that individual emissions of GHGs make an expected morally relevant difference to climate-change-related harms, this difference is often insufficient to motivate them to refrain from emitting.

Like DI, the motivational gap seems to be widespread, as is shown by the empirical literature (Peeters and others 2015). This can be explained by the fact that if individual GHG emissions have morally relevant effects, such effects are likely to appear insignificant in comparison to the benefits people derive from emitting practices such as driving, eating meat, and buying clothes. The moral reasons to refrain from emitting GHGs can then easily be overridden by self-interested reasons through various psychological mechanisms as described in the empirical literature (such as diffusion and displacement of responsibility), leading to the "moral disengagement" of individuals (Peeters and others 2015, 2019). This motivational gap is also reinforced by the fact that the kinds of practices at stake are considered normal and are widely socially accepted.

Some might think that people are simply making mistakes in moral mathematics as famously highlighted by Parfit (1984: 3). In particular, some might think that by multiplying the chance of individual emissions' causing bad consequences by the number of people affected by these consequences (Parfit 1984: 27), people may realise that emissions can be expected to be harmful, which would be a good reason to reduce them regardless of what other emitters do (Hiller 2011). This may be so. However, to argue in favour of a widespread motivational gap, we do not need to contend that people often make mistakes in moral mathematics. We need only to contend that they are not usually motivated by moral mathematics when they think – perhaps mistakenly – that their sacrifice 'is not worth it' in comparison to the moral gain: when they see the sacrifice as too great and the moral gain as too small. Again, this way of thinking conforms with current social norms, which encourages people to embrace it.

If the motivational gap is widespread, then trying to prove OI false to change behaviours is not a promising strategy. Indeed, the motivational gap leads to the same result as DI: failure of reductions of individuals' GHG emissions. Whether OI is true or false, the same result occurs. Either people do not believe in OI, perhaps through mistakes in moral mathematics, or they are not motivated by moral mathematics. In either case, a moral problem remains.

Therefore, another way must be found to undermine both DI and the motivational gap. In what follows, we examine climate esoteric morality as a way of doing this. Climate esoteric morality can then remain agnostic about OI and take no position in this theoretical debate, because its main concerns are DI and the motivational gap.

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3. Climate esoteric morality

What is esoteric morality? In the history of philosophy, the idea of an esoteric morality, which is not to be conflated with historical forms of spiritual or religious esotericism, goes back at least as far as Plato's advocating that a 'noble lie' should be told to citizens about the origins of the state for the sake of its internal cohesion (Plato 2012: 3). Nevertheless, the expression 'esoteric morality' comes from Sidgwick (Sidgwick 1981: 4). It refers to the idea that sometimes secrecy in morality is permitted or even downright required, either about doing something or about recommending doing something. Typical examples of esoteric morality include secretly breaking a moral code for the greater good, such as torturing a terrorist to find out where the bomb is (De Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014: 296), or killing one patient to save four others (De Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014: 297–98).

The general concept of esoteric morality refers more specifically to several related yet distinct ideas in which secrecy is involved. Esoteric morality as conceived by Sidgwick refers to at least five key ideas (De Lazari-Radek and Singer 2010: 35). The first idea is about secrecy in acts: it might sometimes be permitted or even required to conceal one's actions. The second is about moral knowledge: some might know better than others what the right thing to do is. The third is about moral practice: different moral codes might be suitable for different categories of people. The fourth is about concealing the actual moral principles with the moral principles most efficient for guiding actions: the consequentialist might not want others to always act out of consequentialist reasoning. The fifth idea is about the secrecy of esoteric morality itself: esoteric morality should itself remain secret.

Drawing from these ideas, esoteric morality applied to climate change, here termed climate esoteric morality (CEM), would involve some people with the right moral knowledge keeping certain climate-related acts and/or principles secret from others and keeping this entire endeavour secret. Of the five key ideas, the fourth idea, concealing the actual moral principles, best characterises what we mean by CEM in practice. CEM allows and perhaps requires advocating for something one does not believe in for the sake of moral efficiency. What we have in mind is secretly knowing the right moral principles (from the consequentialist perspective), such as 'bringing about good consequences', and the right moral rules, such as 'it is permissible to emit GHGs if it makes you happy without incurring any marginal harm', but concealing these principles and rules from others and instead promoting another set of principles and rules, those that promote the reduction of individual GHG emissions. A consequentialist might then have to promote nonconsequentialist principles in order to promote potentially individually inconsequential rules, e.g., 'minimise your GHG emissions regardless of whether it makes a morally relevant difference'.[4]

Our focus is then on the esoteric concealment of actual principles.[5] CEM presupposes that if people believed that they ought to reduce their individual emissions regardless of whether others do the same or not and regardless of whether there is any

[4]Note that the view we develop here finds strong echoes in Peter Railton's "sophisticated consequentialism", in which one takes "a standing commitment to leading an objectively consequentialist life, but […] does not necessarily seek to lead a subjectively consequentialist life" (Railton 1984: 153). Sophisticated consequentialism, however, as this quote shows, bears more on one's own moral reasoning and motivations, whereas esoteric morality bears on the *influence on others*' moral reasoning and motivations.

[5]Note that Glover makes a similar claim when writing: 'In cases where the argument from no difference is accepted, this should sometimes not be publicised' (Glover 1975: 190).

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prospect of success through the crossing of a threshold of effectiveness, this might lead to success through the effective crossing of a threshold of effectiveness. In other words, if enough people cut their individual GHG emissions and a threshold of effectiveness is crossed, collectively their actions likely make a morally relevant difference to climate-change-related harms (Ivanova and others 2020). If this presupposition is plausible, then it seems desirable that, as far as mitigating climate change is concerned, people believe they are morally bound to act, even unilaterally if necessary. It might then be morally desirable that enough people believe in the moral requirement of individual attempts to mitigate climate change.

By concealing the actual moral principles, we mean either advocating for what we call 'faux' principles; the exaggeration of existing consequentialist principles; or withholding criticism against relevant nonconsequentialist principles. Note that the aspect of CEM we are interested in here by no means implies concealing, disguising, or exaggerating *facts*, especially climate facts. The proposal only targets moral principles. In our view, the risk of corroding public trust in science, which is already low among some groups of people, should never be taken. Furthermore, it is doubtful that researchers should ever practice climate esoteric morality in their research and publications: the risk of corroding public trust in researchers in general should not be taken – and it would go against research ethics and good scientific practice.

First, faux principles are straightforwardly nonconsequentialist principles aiming to make aggregated reductions of individual emissions consequential.[6] Faux principles are false in the sense that they are not consequentialist *per se*, although the act of promoting them can be the correct course of action on consequentialist grounds. They are fake principles that nevertheless are intended to guide the actions of others, and faux in the sense that their consequentialist moral aim is disguised under a nonconsequentialist moral aim. Promoting them is esoteric in the sense that it remains a secret that they are intended as faux.

For example, we would say that the exhortation to moral integrity in climate matters, in the sense of an alignment between the morally required conduct and one's own individual conduct (Hedberg 2018; Hourdequin 2010), is a faux principle, because here moral integrity is in our view merely instrumental to the aim of collective reduction of GHG emissions. Another good example is Jamieson's advocation of 'green virtues' such as temperance, mindfulness, and respect for nature (Jamieson 2007, 2014: 6). Indeed, virtues are supposed to be 'noncalculative generators of behavior' (Jamieson 2007: 167), and as such they call for unilateral environmentally friendly behaviours, regardless of others' behaviour. For a consequentialist, however, they have only instrumental moral value. But if many people believed they have intrinsic moral value, they would surely yield good consequences, because people would embrace them without bothering about the (potentially morally insignificant) consequences of actions virtues motivate them individually to do and then might, again, collectively make a moral difference.

Second, exaggerated principles are suitable when an existing consequentialist principle seems appropriate for reducing GHG emissions only if the extent of one's duty is overstated. In this case, people are led to believe they must do more than they are morally obliged to do. Exaggerated principles are consequentialist principles that exaggerate the moral value of some expected consequence. They are not faux because the

[6]Note that these principles are somehow similar in the function they aim to fulfil to what Peeters and others call 'alternative moral values' (Peeters and others 2015: 5.1.2.).

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moral relevance or value of the state of affairs at stake is real. They simply exaggerate an otherwise real moral relevance or value.

For example, Fragnière criticises the simplistic expected value approach taken by some individual climate ethicists (Hiller 2011; Nolt 2011) as being ignorant of the distinction between concentrated harm and spread harm (Fragnière 2018). As results of collective action, climate-change-induced harms are indeed cases of spread harms rather than concentrated ones. Individuals' emissions cannot be expected to be harmful in another way than by merely contributing to many climate-change-induced harms together with a great quantity of other emissions, as opposed to being fully causally responsible for a portion of these harms. However, although the case made by Fragnière is highly persuasive, this way of presenting things might increase the motivational gap. Therefore, it could be more appropriate to present to the public the expected value approach in its simplistic version rather than its sophisticated version. This could be done by presenting the average concentrated harm that individual emissions can be expected to cause. For instance, according to some estimates, the average American causes great suffering to and/or the deaths of two future people (Nolt 2011) or shortens all future human lives in the coming centuries by six or seven years (Broome 2021). Here, the moral disvalue of the expected harm would be exaggerated by describing the causal link between the individual actions and the harm in such a simplified and emotive way that the moral requirement to refrain from causing it or at least to reduce it appears more stringent.

Lastly, withholding criticism is a more negative approach to CEM because it simply involves refraining from publicly criticising nonconsequentialist principles that have the potential to produce the good outcome of substantially reducing the collective carbon footprint.

These are the main tools that CEM provides for addressing the problem of inconsequentialism. However, there are some limitations to their use. Although faux principles can help overcome climate mitigation inaction fostered by both DI and the motivational gap, exaggerating principles can help only for the motivational gap, because it must be thought in the first place that individual actions of the kind at stake make at least some morally relevant difference to the outcome. When tackling DI, then, merely exaggerating consequentialist principles does not help. In contrast, withholding criticism is a more passive tool but can nevertheless have great strategic value. It is up to the esoteric agent to decide what tools to use and when to use them. This can be challenging, but this is true of any consequentialist calculation of costs, benefits, and chances of success. To sum up, the reason for finding it morally desirable that agents are mistaken about the actual moral principles is that it might produce better consequences overall. Climate mitigation might indeed be implemented more rapidly if many people believed that potentially individually effectless reduction of individual GHG emissions was morally required. This could also have social and political 'spiral' effects (Glover 1975).

Of the five key ideas of esoteric morality, CEM also entails secrecy in acts that contribute to climate change if they happen to be inconsequential but are somehow symbolic of climate harmful behaviour, such as flying to a vacation in a faraway place. Someone could, for instance, publicly announce that people ought to reduce their personal GHG emissions, and then secretly fly to a vacation in some distant paradise island. If one's GHG emissions happen to be inconsequential, the overall benefits of going on vacation outweighs the inconsequential contribution to climate change, even if it is not desirable that everyone does the same. This may strike one as hypocritical, and hardly a serious attempt to tackle the problem of inconsequentialism. It should

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nevertheless be acknowledged as a possible implication of CEM. Secrecy of acts is not, however, primarily what we have in mind when assessing CEM as a way of dealing with the problem of inconsequentialism.

4. Objections to a climate esoteric morality

Esoteric morality in general and CEM in particular are not exempt from objections. There are both theoretical and practical objections to climate esoteric morality. Here we set aside the much-discussed question of whether the self-effacing character of a moral theory that can recommend discouraging agents from acting according to its core principles is theoretically and practically problematic or not (see Eggleston 2013; Parfit 1984: 17). We focus on five objections relating to: secrecy; incompatibility with a publicity condition; ineffectiveness; demandingness; and the redundancy of CEM in light of other consequentialist reasons.

4.1. Secrecy objection

The first objection is that it is hardly a secret that there may be a problem of ontological inconsequentialism. Such a perception seems to be part of public opinion, as we mentioned above. Even some politicians refer to it when claiming that their countries' contributions are allegedly inconsequential at the global scale (e.g., Mathiesen 2017; Rucker and Johnson 2017). In short, the idea of inconsequentialism is so firmly established among the public that the applicability of esoteric morality to climate change has a practical problem: the 'secret' has already been revealed.

However, the secrecy condition seems to be more stringent for esoteric acts than for concealing actual moral principles. For example, if a publicly renowned philosopher, taking the role of an academic expert on the matter, exhorts everyone to cut their GHG emissions and then is caught flying to vacation, public trust in experts might be corroded in general, and in particular the plausibility of the philosopher's exhortations. Here secrecy is important, and as long as the philosopher does not risk being caught when privately maximising value in a counterintuitive way, their esoteric actions might be justifiable on consequentialist grounds.

However, unlike the more typical cases of esoteric morality such as torture and killing one to save many, the secrecy involved in CEM does not necessarily happen 'behind locked doors'.[7] Again, our focus on CEM is not so much about acts in a narrow sense but on beliefs and recommendations. When esoterically concealing the actual principles by publicly advocating faux principles, exaggerating principles, or withholding criticism, perfect secrecy is not necessary. For CEM to work, it does not matter that neither inconsequentialism nor esoteric morality itself is not a secret. First, there is no way to tell a faux principle apart from a genuine principle. For instance, a faux principle is a principle motivated by a consequentialist perspective with an appearance of a nonconsequentialist principle, and it is impossible to tell them apart. Faux principles are characteristically principles that one thinks, from the perspective of one's belief system, to be inconsistent and incorrect, and then presents it as a consistent and correct principle. For generating faux principles, as we saw above, several nonconsequentialist

[7]Note that at least in this respect our proposal of a CEM differs from Seidel's proposal of a 'Government House Climate Ethics', although unlike CEM, that principle is situated at the level of institutionalised international negotiations and therefore does not necessarily contradict it (Seidel 2016).

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principles are well argued for, and it is enough for a consequentialist philosopher to both advocate them and refrain from criticising them publicly. Thus, a faux principle may have a word-by-word similar appearance to principles that others think are correct. Second, one cannot know the intentions of an esoteric consequentialist. It remains a secret when someone is advancing a faux principle, exaggerating an existing principle, or refraining from criticising nonconsequentialist principles. Of course, the secrecy of these intentions needs to be maintained.

Moreover, secrecy is not a problem for concealing the correct moral principle by withholding criticism. Esoterically withholding criticism is simply an omission from publicly announcing and advocating the moral principles one actually is committed to. Thus, from a consequentialist perspective, someone is doing something wrong if they try to correct others from having false beliefs or wrong moral commitments that nevertheless have good expected outcomes in the context of climate change and inconsequentialism. One should not object publicly if someone promotes, say, deontological principles according to which people are doing something wrong when causing GHG emissions. Secrecy in CEM is keeping one's true beliefs hidden from other people. However, the risk of losing publicity in a morally problematic way is apparent here, and this gives grounds for the next objection we consider.

4.2. Publicity objection

Esoteric morality and the aspect of it that is of interest to us here is also objected to on the ground that it violates the publicity principle, which some claim is of utmost importance in moral and political life. This principle states, briefly, that any moral and political theory should satisfy a 'publicity condition' (Rawls 1999, 2005): all the moral and political principles it promotes to guide individual conduct and public policies should be publicly justifiable to all of those to whom they apply. CEM may seem not to satisfy this condition, because it aims to discourage people from using hardcore consequentialist goals to achieve consequentialist goals for climate change. This could be seen as manipulation and raises concerns about the moral permissibility of esoteric morality generally and CEM in particular.

Indeed, one major reason why the publicity condition is defended is that its violation may support a kind of domination, i.e., of arbitrary power exercised by an elite over the mass, thus constraining their freedom (Eggleston 2013). This worry seems to be expressed by Bernard Williams' famous charge against Sidgwick's alleged "Government House Utilitarianism" (Williams 1995: 166; see also Sen and Williams 1982: 16). According to this charge, an implication of utilitarianism – and, seemingly, of any other consequentialist moral theory – is that it may justify a paternalistic and manipulative power exercised by a (utilitarian) ruling elite over a (non-utilitarian) ruled mass, typical of some historical forms of colonial government (Sen and Williams 1982; Williams 1973). In particular, this may allegedly justify inculcating anti-utilitarian arguments to the non-utilitarian mass for the sake of pursuing utilitarian ends (Luban 1996).

We can conceive two kinds of reply to the publicity objection, depending on how the publicity principle is understood. One strategy is to question the fact that climate esoteric morality violates the publicity principle. First, if public justification is required first and foremost when coercion is exercised by the state (Larmore 2008; Rawls 2005; Vallier 2022: 2), it may not always be required when coercion is not at stake. However, CEM does not imply coercion because it only aims at motivating people to reduce their GHG

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emissions. Second, if publicity first and foremost concerns the principles ruling the basic structure of society, and therefore the basic principles of justice ruling society (Rawls 2005), it may not apply to all other moral and political principles. However, CEM's application and outreach is modest and leaves basic principles of justice untouched. Third, the aspect of CEM we are interested in does not concern actions that would have to remain secret, but only some reasons underlying the action. Publicity of action is then maintained with the aspect of CEM we presented here. Finally, it is not contradictory to say that CEM might be publicly justifiable even if its execution remains secret. Consider how, analogously, in democratic societies, there are instances of organisations operating under secrecy whose existence is publicly justifiable, such as intelligence agencies. Similarly, there can be public justifications of CEM, for instance based on its expected good consequences, and some influential moral agents who try to esoterically influence individuals' carbon footprints (see section 3). All these arguments tend to support the claim that even according to the publicity principle, publicity does not always need to be complete.

Another strategy is to directly question the value of the publicity principle. The commitment to the publicity condition may depend on a commitment to a certain kind of contractualism, most notably Rawlsian contractualism. An essential feature of this kind of contractualism is that any justified moral or political principle is the outcome of an agreement between idealised reasonable people. Therefore, publicity about moral justifications is paramount to it. However, if we reject this contractualist premise and adopt a consequentialist framework according to which the promotion of moral values does not depend on a previous agreement, then publicity is no longer as important as in contractualism, even though usually desirable (De Lazari-Radek and Singer 2010; Eggleston 2013). At the very least, it is no longer a necessary condition to a justified ethical principle.

4.3. Ineffectiveness objection

A further objection is that the behavioural changes that CEM aims at would be ineffective. What are needed for climate change mitigation, so the objection goes, are economic, technical, and other structural changes, and changes in individual behaviours will not do anything to mitigate climate change. Focusing on individual behaviours risks distracting us from the proper way of mitigating climate change.

This objection can be answered by arguing that changes in individual behaviours are necessary to mitigate climate change although, it is true, also insufficient to reach the + 2 °C target set by the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC 2015: 2). However, if they are necessary, then they are not ineffective.

Arguably, changes in individuals' behaviour are necessary in the current circumstances. Even if it were possible in the abstract that the economy be totally exempt from GHG emissions, it will not in all likelihood materialise soon. For instance, large scale production of green hydrogen for aviation is not expected before the middle of this century (Bruce and others 2020; Kovač and others 2021). Moreover, although technical innovation and progress are instrumental to tackling climate change, rebound effects threaten to partly offset mitigation efficiency gains if no measures are taken to encourage consumption sobriety (York and others 2022). Then an overall reduction of consumption of carbon-intensive goods and services in the very short term is necessary. Given the non-ideal situation of partial compliance of states and companies, if aggregated changes in individual behaviours can help reduce consumption of

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carbon-intensive goods and services, then it ought to be encouraged. We think there exists some empirical evidence that they can do (see Wynes and Nicholas 2017).

As an illustration, consider that in 2017, the average carbon footprint of a French citizen was 10.8 tons of CO2 equivalent (CO2e). As we saw above, the global annual average individual carbon footprint should drop to 2 tons of CO2e by 2050. It is estimated that aggregated individual behaviours such as shifting to a plant-based diet, driving less, or renovating one's house, are able to decrease the French annual average carbon footprint by 2.8 tons: around one quarter of the average carbon footprint and almost a third of the decrease necessary to reach the Paris Agreement goal (Dugast and Soyeux 2019). Even if this shows that individual behaviour changes alone are insufficient to reach the goal, it still shows that individuals can already do a lot.

Thus, through aggregation of individual reductions of GHG emissions, a 'threshold of effectiveness' can be crossed for climate change mitigation. However, CEM cannot be the only way to seek climate change mitigation. It is only one among various tools available that should be understood as complementary. As a 'wicked' problem (Incropera 2016; Lazarus 2008), climate change cannot have one only solution.

The danger of focusing only on individual behaviours should be taken seriously, because this would result in insufficient mitigation, and this is a plausible scenario given the interests of powerful companies, states, and other agents that are at stake. However, first, this temptation can and should be resisted through constant insistence on the importance of both behavioural and structural changes. Second, focusing solely on structural changes brings the danger of forgetting that the individual behavioural changes of high emitters are necessary to climate change mitigation. Indeed, behavioural and structural changes and political action pushing for these are not mutually exclusive (Brownstein and others 2022; Willis and Schor 2012). In liberal societies, many structural changes are even intended to provide the opportunity to individuals to live a more sustainable way of life without constraining them. If individuals have to make sustainable choices, they should be morally encouraged to do so from now on.

Finally, from a broader perspective, another sense of potential ineffectiveness deserves attention. One can always ask whether CEM would even work. Could esoteric consequentialists really change others' minds about their duty to reduce their GHG emissions, and so, would that lead to any effective change? Of course, there is always a risk of failure, but the risk that CEM might be ineffective does not completely undermine the moral argument for it. It is up to the esoteric consequentialist to decide when this risk is worth taking, depending on expected costs and benefits, and this in turn is an empirical matter. If consequentialist principles are relatively simple, their application to a complex world is always complicated. Nevertheless, if CEM leads to costs to others without sufficient moral benefits, then an additional objection – demandingness – could be brought against it. We discuss this objection next.

4.4. Demandingness objection

A demandingness objection could be raised against CEM. The aim of concealing the actual moral principles is often to exaggerate or maybe even downright fabricate individual agents' climate responsibilities to achieve a morally relevant outcome at a collective and aggregative level. However, there is a risk that following these principles might yield no good consequences while incurring a cost to the moral agent (Cripps 2013: 6). One might then object to a lack of proportionality: if following a moral principle is costly to an agent without producing benefits that outweigh the costs, it would be

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overdemanding to require the agent to follow it (van Ackeren and Kühler 2016: 4). Especially if OI is correct, consequentialist grounds may raise the demandingness objection against CEM. This is because concealing the correct principle leads to costs that have a high chance of not producing any tangible benefits, and in the case of fabricating faux principles, the cost does not even seem morally justified in the first place. Thus, faux principles and exaggerating principles do not seem to be justified by the benefits they are supposed to yield, and they also seem overly demanding.

When fabricating or exaggerating principles, it must first be acknowledged that one aims to make the agents do more than they morally ought to do: this is a direct opposite of how esoteric thinking has usually been applied in the literature. For instance, Singer has sometimes watered down their propositions to convince a broader audience of their ideas, such as when they propose that people donate 10 percent of their income to save the lives of distant strangers (De Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014: 295; Singer 2009) even if, on consequentialist grounds, an individual may have a duty to donate much more. This is because otherwise people might be put off by the demandingness of such a duty (Singer 2004). In this kind of case, downsizing the full extent of an individual's duties is permissible to make following otherwise very demanding moral principles more appealing. In contrast, with CEM, people are misled to overestimate their responsibilities rather than underestimate them. This may motivate a demandingness objection.

However, sometimes taking the risk of being overly demanding is acceptable when compared with what is at stake, for example avoiding runaway climate change (Lenton and others 2019). Further, we acknowledge that an undifferentiated targeting of emitters could in some cases result in highly demanding recommendations, given the important moral difference between subsistence and luxury emissions (Shue 1993). Subsistence emissions are those emissions necessary to reach a 'minimally decent standard of living' (Shue 1993: 42) by satisfying basic needs such as consuming healthy food, sheltering, and enjoying minimal education. Luxury emissions are all other emissions. Cutting subsistence emissions can only be done at very high personal costs. CEM should therefore only aim at reducing luxury emissions, and it is luxury emitters who are most able and most urgently required to reduce their emissions. Even if the distinction between luxury and subsistence emissions is difficult to draw in practice, it seems obvious that many people produce emissions that are easily linked to luxury activities, such as eating meat at every meal, flying to distant places for vacation, and regularly buying unneeded new clothes. Thus, CEM should only target luxury emissions, not emissions that are essential for satisfying people's basic needs and interests. Moreover, some climate-friendly actions may also have beneficial side effects for the agent, such as a climate-friendly and healthy diet: this is something that should be added to the harm–benefit analysis. Thus, the high moral benefits of mitigating climate change, the cost of luxurious activities alone, and the potential beneficial side effects can help downplay the demandingness objection.

4.5. Redundancy objection

A last objection is based on the potential redundancy of CEM. Generally, the spirit of this kind of objection is that a theoretical device is redundant because its function is already fulfilled by another theoretical device. Therefore, the newly introduced one is useless if not irrelevant. At the very least, it should be shown that the newly introduced device performs its function better than the alternatives. In our case, some might say

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that CEM is redundant considering other consequentialist moral reasons that can require and motivate people to reduce their GHG emissions, even if OI, DI, or the motivational gap is true.

Consequentialists might indeed argue that there are, as we have started to see in the previous sub-section, so many morally good expectable side effects other than the reduction of climate-change-related harms of reducing one's GHG emissions that we do not need to appeal to its expected consequences on climate-change-related harms in the first place to morally motivate people to do it. Thus, we do not need to appeal to esoteric morality if the expected consequences cannot be a source of motivation. It might be right to adopt conducts that have the effect of reducing GHG emissions because it usually means reducing activities and the consumption of goods that affect some valued states of affairs, such as clean air and animal welfare.

We can imagine two replies to this. First, while some of these side effects may sometimes motivate people to act or refrain from acting in such a way that it incidentally reduces their GHG emissions, others seem to depend clearly on the responsiveness of individual agents to collective action problems, and therefore potentially face DI or a motivational gap. Second, even if such moral reasons are currently sufficient to motivate people to reduce their GHG emissions incidentally, this motivation is contingent on whether the side effects in question persist. This makes them quite fragile as reasons for reducing individual GHG emissions, because as soon as the positive side effects disappear, the reasons for reducing GHG emissions will fade with them.

5. Conclusion

This paper has identified and examined CEM as a potential response to the problem of inconsequentialism in individual climate ethics. We noted that inconsequentialism in general is an awkward problem, particularly for act consequentialism, and we showed that CEM provides act consequentialism with tools for addressing the problem and that these tools are consistent with the overall consequentialist frame of thinking. CEM may be applied by esoterically concealing the actual moral principle through introducing nonconsequentialist faux principles, exaggerating existing consequentialist principles, and withholding criticism about nonconsequentialist principles.

We also discussed potential objections to CEM. We concluded that there are no direct objections to using it but that there is always a risk of failure, which should be adjusted to take into account the extremely high costs of not mitigating climate change. When to use CEM is partly an empirical matter, but it is consistent with act consequentialism, and there is a justification for using it when viable. It is a judgement call the esoteric consequentialist must make.

However, CEM is not an ideal or first option for tackling climate change. It is merely one tool in the quite diverse toolbox of an act consequentialist, and it should not obstruct us from other, more efficient ways of responding to climate change. For instance, if promoting political change is a more efficient way to tackle climate change, it should be prioritised (Cripps 2013: 6; Fragnière 2016: 807–9). CEM is merely a complementary tool. However, the theoretical significance of CEM is that it shows how act consequentialism has ways of dealing with inconsequentialism, and that it should therefore not be downright disqualified in this regard to the benefit of other competing theories.

However, some uneasy implications come with endorsing CEM. As we saw, act consequentialism has been accused of elitism. Endorsing CEM seems to strengthen this

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problematic image. In a sense, esoterically concealing actual moral principles seems to imply not staying true to one's beliefs, as it involves a certain kind of deception. However, the justification and access to CEM follows from the intrinsic qualities of act consequentialism. It can be asked whether the need to resort to such means shows a dubious aspect of consequentialism, or if it is rather one of the many adverse effects of climate change that there is no way to respond to it without some kind of moral residue.

Another concern touched upon above is research ethics in moral philosophy: researchers in ethics must be careful with CEM, to retain integrity and avoid corroding public trust in research. This is why it is important to highlight again that CEM must never include deception about facts. This also flows from consequentialist thinking, because losing trust in science would have dire consequences. Researchers cannot practice CEM, but CEM itself permits *non-researchers* to deceive others about normative principles, by making up faux principles, exaggerating consequentialist principles or concealing the principles they think are correct.

Ethics is a normative field, and CEM is a normative move that is consistent with how philosophical ethics operates. As long as esoterically concealing the actual moral principles can be philosophically justified, is consistent with act consequentialism, and can be publicly justified, the deception is far less problematic. Whether this feature counts as a counterargument against act consequentialism depends on one's views about ethics in general, and CEM will probably not convince those who are already suspicious of consequentialist thinking. However, CEM can show the philosophical flexibility and versatility of consequentialist theorising.

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