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Challenging the values of the polluter elite: A global consequentialist response to Evensen and Graham's (2022) *'The irreplaceable virtues of in-person conferences'*

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Highlights

- Conferences afford many benefits, but the privilege of enjoying these is not shared equally
- Emissions from conference travel negatively impact on ecosystems and future generations
- By flying to demonstrably value other cultures, researchers contribute to destroying these cultures

Evensen and Graham (2022) urge academics to have ‘*open and honest conversations about the full suite of values associated with “conference travel”*’. We understand this as a call for academics to consider, and discuss, the personal reasons underlying their travel decisions; and for those researching conference travel to consider values, attitudes, and other psychological factors as predictors of travel. On both fronts, we couldn’t agree more, but will counter several points Evensen and Graham make on the way.

There can be no doubt that academics gain more than just academic knowledge, or even social connections, from conferences. As Evensen and Graham point out, travel can be rewarding in very personal ways as well. These are more difficult to research, and to discuss with colleagues, because of social desirability effects: Acknowledging private motivations for conference travel makes academics vulnerable to ecologically motivated criticism and to accusations of misspending tax money, a difficulty which is exacerbated the more contentious travel becomes (Goodwin, 2020). But these motivations must indeed be reflected on and researched.

Because environmental psychologists have almost completely neglected air travel as a research topic, there is a lack of systematic understanding of how values, beliefs, and attitudes influence (business) travel decisions in a climate change context. It would be more than appropriate for our discipline to contribute to the ongoing discussion on business air travel by researching these factors. We do point out, however, that the conversation so far has not solely focussed on ‘*matters relating to conferences themselves*’ and disregarded value systems (Le Quéré et al., 2015; Nevins, 2014; Nursey-Bray et al., 2019; Parker & Weik, 2014; Schrems & Upham, 2020; Whitmarsh et al., 2020). In fact, the scholars leading the conversations tend to be acutely aware of the complexities of personal and professional needs involved in flying, because they negotiate them in their own travel decisions (Grant, 2018; Høyer, 2009).

Where we disagree with Evensen and Graham is on the way they present concern for environmental destruction and damage to human communities due to climate change as on the same level as the values of ‘*cultural appreciation, immersion in history, epicurean diversity (i.e. good cuisine), [and] experiencing a range of climates and ecosystems*’. Here it becomes crucial to separate two layers of the discussion: When scholars research the values involved in making travel decisions, they must treat all values as equal to obtain reliable results. But when we speak with colleagues about what our collective practices should be, a central question is which values should be more emphasised than others. Much has been said about this, and it is useful to name the positions we each take: When Evensen and Graham judge Evensen’s recent trip to have been worth its carbon emissions, on the basis of the benefits to himself, this is a form of hedonistic consequentialism (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2021). We, on the other hand, position our response within a framework of global actual consequentialism, which considers the virtues of a behaviour in terms of its (dis)benefits of for all human and non-human life (Holbrook, 1997; Leopold, 1949). While flying is by no means the only contributor to climate change, it is by far the most polluting mode of transport per kilometre; transport also has the highest mitigation potential of all sectors (Ivanova et al., 2020).

Evensen and Graham claim those who argue for a reduction in conference air travel assign ‘*extreme*’ importance to protecting the environment, a rhetorical move that presents their own values as moderate and reasonable in contrast. But when what is at stake are the livelihoods and lives of entire communities, is prioritising the fun involved in visiting different places really moderate – especially when those who benefit and those who suffer the gravest consequences are systematically different groups of people?

Evensen and Graham’s position overlooks not only the mismatch in the magnitude between benefits and negative consequences of flying, but also their distribution, and thereby the issues of justice which are at the core of air travel and climate change. The perks of travel have been experienced by a small cadre of “polluter elites” (Newell et al., 2021, p.13). In almost all countries, a minority of people can afford to fly (even without paying for voluntary carbon offsets); most flights are taken by the wealthy (Possible, 2021; Ivanova et al., 2020) despite the price of a flight often being lower than alternative modes. Even within academia, physical conferences are often not culturally diverse – they are often too expensive for people from developing countries to attend, and consequently do not foster culturally diverse academic networks (Derudder & Liu, 2016). They often also exclude people without their own funding (e.g., early-career researchers, as Evensen and Graham acknowledge) and those with caring responsibilities (Whitmarsh et al., 2020). So, while it may be the case that wealthy academics (from the global north, who are not primary carers) have the option to travel to far-flung countries and enjoy different cultures, this is not a privilege which is shared equally amongst or even within countries.

Ironically, Evensen and Graham advocate more ‘*systems thinking*’ in academia, by which they mean seeing academics as ‘*whole people*’. But systems thinking might also lead us to a very different conclusion than Evensen and Graham’s. By considering the much wider impacts of a particular person’s travel – on ecosystems, on developing countries, on future generations, on their colleagues, or even on their own partner or children left at home – one might rightly deduce that choosing to take frequent trips to overseas conferences is not merely selfish but – when taking a wider systems view – imposes morally unacceptable consequences. Put another way, there are powerless victims of the decision to take an international flight.

Evensen and Graham also construct a sort of dichotomy between wanting to reduce air travel to limit climate change and being a global citizen that appreciates culture and history. This false dichotomy wrongly implies that those who call for a reduction in travel are culturally ignorant. The opposite is true: Like most of our audience likely does, we too appreciate culture and history and consider ourselves global citizens, and it is in part from these very values that our wanting to limit climate change results. We wish to protect that which we appreciate, and we value its continued existence, wellbeing, and integrity above our own ability to consume it. Of course, one *can* still enjoy other cultures and attend overseas conferences in person in less environmentally damaging ways. This might mean travelling by less polluting modes (trains instead of planes) and less often (travelling overseas every three years, instead of multiple times per year; C40, 2022).

This example illustrates that when we discuss the values involved in making decisions about high-emitting practices such as air travel, we must look very closely at the manifold and often contradictory ways in which any given value can be enacted. As another example, Evensen and Graham name ‘*cultural appreciation*’ as potential benefits justifying conference travel; we could argue why such values require a reduction in travel.

Moreover, discussing values should come with a reflection of where our values come from, and where they lead. Values are shaped by physical and institutional contexts (e.g. it is hard to travel to appreciate the world if you can’t afford it). Value systems, and the ways in which values are enacted, can also be influenced by and maintain political systems and ideologies (e.g. purity, obedience, productivity). Without scrutinising the real-world consequences of the way we enact values, we risk imposing damaging ideologies and systems – in the context of our conversation, over-tourism comes to mind. It is also important to scrutinise which values are adopted by whom: Evensen and Graham may well value ‘*epicurean enlightenment*’ but this contrasts with values of having a safe and healthy life for those living with climate extremes or our grandchildren who might inherit an uninhabitable planet (cf. IPCC, 2022). Indeed, one might observe that the assertion of ‘*valuing*’ other cultures and deriving enjoyment from international travel could only be made by an elite – someone for whom having the resources to attend a foreign conference is an unquestioned necessity, let alone whose existence is unthreatened by climate extremes. We may go as far as to label Evensen and Graham’s libertarian view as manifestly cultural imperialist or colonialist (their tourist right to enjoy other countries trumps the existence rights of other cultures).

As a final point, we respectfully point out that there will be no exotic cultures and countries to enjoy in a 6-degree world, in any case (IPCC, 2022). The more the polluter elite maintains their high-carbon practices, including flying to demonstrably value other cultures, the more they contribute to destroying these cultures. Such self-defeatism is perhaps the most obvious flaw in Evensen and Graham’s argument.

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