

Carbon Offsets for Travellers: Effective CO2 reduction or just guilt relief?

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Thank you Patrick for inviting me to be here. Thanks everyone for coming to listen tonight, it should be a very interesting evening.

Before I begin, I should make a few disclaimers. I'm not here as an expert, and I don't work with any organisation. I am here only in my capacity as private individual. There are enough people who pretend to be experts among those who talk about climate change; I'm not one, and don't pretend to be. But I have thought about some of the issues raised here tonight, and so I was invited to talk about these aspects of carbon offsetting which are not so much hard science, which are more cultural, or psychological, or philosophical, or political.

What I would like to do tonight is raise a little bit of scepticism about carbon offsetting. But I want to be very clear that this is scepticism in the true spirit of science. It is very much not anything of the sort that goes by the name today of "climate scepticism" — which is actually a form of dogmatism. It is simply some scepticism about the effectiveness, and some other aspects of carbon offsetting.

And before I go any further, since I may be a little provocative tonight, let me make clear that nothing I'm going to say tonight is intended in any personal sort of way. I am sure that all the people here tonight are working very hard and sincerely to alleviate serious environmental problems. I almost feel a bit guilty coming along, as one who does not work in the field, to express scepticism about what is clearly noble, beneficial, positive work. None of this is meant to detract from the good work people are doing. That said, any scientist, anyone who believes in democracy, agrees that honest and sincere criticism or scepticism is necessary if society is to pursue the best options to improve the human condition.

So — the topic for discussion is "Carbon Offsets for Travelers: Effective CO2 reduction or just guilt relief". So let's begin with putting our question in perspective. Then we can look at the effectiveness of CO2 reduction by carbon offsetting. And then we can talk about guilt relief.

Well then, first: perspective. Let's look at the big picture.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you how big a problem climate change is. I like to think of it this way — drastically oversimplified, of course. The human race has

managed to claw its way out of subsistence life, all the way up to unprecedented levels of comfort and prosperity — and it has done this by harnessing the energy of fossil fuels. We burnt our way out of poverty with coal and oil. This great human civilization — well, often not so great — has been built on foundations of fossil fuel and carbon dioxide emissions. And the human project is running off a cliff. Because not only is that fuel finite in nature, becoming increasingly scarce, on a finite planet — but more immediately, the fumes are beginning to choke us, so to speak, via the greenhouse effect. And this planet is extraordinarily fragile. And there aren't many other planets around. So the stakes are very high. The great engine of human civilization is running off this cliff, and it cannot slow down, and the only option we have is to take off under our own power, under renewable and sustainable power, and soar to new heights. We will become sustainable, conscious, aware citizens of this tiny planet in this vast universe, or we will face extremely grisly consequences. This challenge can bring the world together; it is, perhaps, the greatest opportunity for world unity and peace. It probably also offers the greatest opportunity for global catastrophe. But that's up to us, and what happens depends on our actions.

Our focus is fairly narrow tonight — seen from that perspective! From the great, existential problem of a sustainable human civilization, we focus on the temporary crucial threat of climate change; we focus further on the release of greenhouse gases. Then we focus further, on one specific scheme to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, namely carbon offsetting. More narrowly than that, we are talking about voluntary carbon offsetting — unlike those under the Kyoto protocol, for instance. And more narrowly again, we are talking about voluntary carbon offsetting for travellers.

So that is the context, the perspective we're working in; quite a narrow one.

For another sense of perspective, I want to tell you about a calculation I saw recently in the book *Heat: How to stop the planet burning*, by the British investigative journalist and environmentalist George Monbiot, based on the current state of scientific knowledge — well, he was writing before the IPCC's fourth assessment report, but I don't think things have changed that much. Once we stabilise carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere at safe levels, avoiding catastrophic climate change, how much we can safely emit? He ends up with a yearly 'carbon ration' for each person every year. It's about 1.2 tonnes of CO₂ per person per year. Now, you look at how much carbon dioxide is emitted on a plane flight, say, across the Atlantic and back. As it turns out, that's about 1.2 tonnes per person — your entire yearly carbon ration. But it's worse than that, because aeroplanes fly higher in the atmosphere, and leave condensation trails behind them around which clouds tend to form, all of which makes the effect of flying 2–4 times worse than what those emissions would usually cause. So, you are in deep trouble. Furthermore, no technology is currently on the horizon to improve aeroplane efficiency by more than 20–30% or so, I understand; and even then, it takes a long time to introduce new technology into aeroplanes. Monbiot is maybe a little conservative in his estimates; he wants a 2/3 probability that we don't screw up the planet. But whatever the precise figures, the order of magnitude is clear. Flying eats up your entire carbon allowance very quickly.

Well, this calculation is possibly the most depressing piece of arithmetic I've ever seen. I found it absolutely crushing. But the last thing I want to do is depress everyone here! Although, if you are so depressed that you stay in bed all day, you won't produce many carbon emissions! But this is the scale of the problem. This is how much things have got to change — and this really makes smaller-scale responses like carbon offsetting pale in comparison — really quite miniscule. Monbiot comes to a crushing conclusion — and I must admit, I find it difficult to resist, as much as I want to, because I want to travel like everyone else — the conclusion that if you fly, you destroy other people's lives. Whatever the case, these are unavoidable facts which we must confront. But of course, this only applies to air travel. Plus, of course, in the next few decades, many things are going to change in ways that we cannot predict. So I hope this is not too depressing. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, they say; well I think there is a shorter road to hell, and it is the road paved with inaction and despair. I urge you not to go down that road.

So, okay, that is some perspective for you! The facts of the world are not always very pleasing, but we must confront them, we cannot ignore them. It's a very useful way to put carbon offsetting in perspective.

Well then, let's come to the first prong of our discussion tonight: "effective CO2 reduction." This is, to a large extent, a technical question, on which I must defer to greater expertise in the room. And whatever the prospects for effectiveness, if nothing else, the overarching intention of these projects — to clean up the environment, to absorb CO2 from the atmosphere, to mitigate the onset of global warming — we very much hope they succeed in these goals.

Let me just make a couple of broad comments about these technical matters; I'm very interested in what others have to say. In any carbon offsetting scheme, consumers calculate their emissions; and then pay for an equivalent amount of carbon to be removed from the atmosphere by the offset project. So the offset project has to be able to quantify how much carbon it removes from the atmosphere. More precisely, it has to be able to quantify how much carbon it removes from the atmosphere, that would not have been removed otherwise. You have to engage in a sort of fantasy, or counterfactual. And these can be tricky. Then there are timescale problems — because say, planting a tree today will not really soak up much carbon for quite a few years, yet your carbon emissions happen today. But these are technical questions, and I am not an expert.

So let me stop talking technicalities. What is the point of carbon offsetting? This is a procedure by which a traveller engages in some travel, calculates the amount of carbon they created in the process, and then pays it off. Paying for an offset does not affect the fact that you already travelled. It did not make you stop travelling. It did not make you travel less. In fact, if you paid for an offset for travelling, of course, you went travelling! Yet we agree that we need to reduce our emissions. Given Monbiot's depressing piece of arithmetic, if we continue to consume as much as we do today, then the planet is in deep trouble. We need to reduce our emissions as well as remove carbon from the atmosphere. We need to offset what's already in the atmosphere, as well as

what we contribute by travelling now.

This is pretty obvious. But it means that carbon offsetting can end up being no more than a guilt-relieving procedure. It can let you travel, but then clear your conscience. If taken in this way, you may end up consuming just as much as you did before, maybe even more, but you feel better about it — all as global warming proceeds apace. In this case, even if offsetting succeeds technically, it will not succeed as part of an overall strategy to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of the human race. It will become nothing more than a modern version of the indulgence — the medieval scheme whereby, from the church, you could buy absolution for your sins.

Well, that is one way carbon offsetting could be approached. But of course, it's not the only way. Offsetting, arguably, can also work as a consciousness-raising mechanism. If, as you offset, you become aware of your impact on the environment, and you resolve to reduce that impact, and you change your lifestyle, you change your consumption habits, then this is precisely what we want and need in our efforts to become a sustainable society.

But note: In this sense, carbon offsets can only be a stopgap, temporary, residual option. The approach must be — reduce your emissions where you can, offset what you can't reduce yet, but still try to reduce your emissions, however possible, so you have less to offset in future. If carbon offsets are to work, they must be regarded as a leftover, not as the main course. They must operate in the hope that one day they become unnecessary. To put it paradoxically — and I mean this in the nicest possible way! — I hope that carbon offset projects are so successful in their consciousness-raising role, that they become redundant and have as little business as possible.

I am not sure which approach will dominate in practice, whether carbon offsetting will come to be used as a guilt-relieving tool, or as a tool to raise awareness and lead to further, deeper changes. I very much hope the latter, and I'm sure those involved in carbon offsetting schemes would agree.

There is one other question about the effectiveness of carbon offsetting. If it is at most a sort of residual, stopgap, temporary approach to the problem of greenhouse emissions, then there are other approaches to the problem of greenhouse emissions which are more important — like, for instance, stopping greenhouse emissions happening in the first place! If the focus on carbon offsetting is too sharp, and detracts from other, more important solutions, then carbon offsetting will not be effective. Again, perhaps offsetting will raise awareness and approval and legitimacy for other, more thorough reforms. I don't know, and again, I hope so.

Okay, enough of effectiveness. Let's turn more specifically to the question of guilt relief. This is more a question of psychology, a question of ethics, a question of philosophy. It is less scientific, so a non-expert like me can speak more broadly.

Let me be blunt here. I think there is a fair argument that voluntary carbon offsetting is simply a commodified version of guilt. Your conscience nags at you for flying too much, or travelling more generally — and your conscience is right, because, even if your conscience hasn't seen the exact arithmetic, it suspects

that something very much like it is true! But then, the transaction is made, money is paid, and your conscience is satisfied. There was no change in lifestyle, no change in career, no large-scale structural shift in your life, or society. There was no participation. Just payment of money.

So you paid off your conscience, paid off your guilt — and this, I think, is troubling. The very idea that you can discharge your ethical responsibilities in life by paying money is deeply troubling. If we do not find it troubling, that says something about how far capitalist and consumer culture has permeated our lives.

Offsetting, in this sense, is a very pure type of an transaction, reduced to a pure market form, pure commodification. In this sense, it is deeply alienating. There is no connection with other human beings involved. There is no sense of community involved. There is no sense of coming together as a human community to change our lives, to change our society. Our social bonds are dissolved. All that is solid melts into air. All other things being equal, I should think we should prefer an option which increases our togetherness as a society, increases our community, improves social bonds, increases participation in the solution.

Well, now, you may think I'm sounding a bit mean here! Isn't this all actually quite noble? Isn't it altruism? Am I just criticising altruism when we put it into practice, calling it guilt, calling it commodification? Everyone admires noble altruism! So what do I mean? To answer, let me take a bit of a detour into philosophy.

In very broad and oversimplified terms, we can see carbon offsetting as involving an ethics of sin, guilt, and absolution. The ethics of offsetting is an ethics of accounting, accounting for emissions, and redeeming ourselves for them. It is an ethics of self-examination — which is all well and good, but there is more to the world than ourselves! To me at least, it seems a much better approach — to carbon offsetting, and to life — if one can orient oneself, philosophially and dispositionally, outwards. We look upon the world, try to understand our place in the world, and act upon it, act within it, as we can. So we might say, one must live one's inner life outside oneself for life to be meaningful — this is what Bertrand Russell, the great philosopher, regarded as the key to a happy and meaningful life. So with this philosophy, then, we can come to the world, see the oncoming environmental catastrophe, and try to do something about it. And you can take many approaches. You can adjust your lifestyle. You can take up a career in the environmental field. Or you can do something like purchasing carbon offsets. Now the first two options are extremely noble, at least to my mind. Yet the latter option — the carbon offsetting option — at least to my mind, does not carry the same noble tinge. When we take this road, we take the accounting approach, the confessional approach, and we pay off our sins. What did we pay off? We could say we paid off our altruism, but that doesn't quite sound right. Altruism is better than that; you can't pay off altruism. On the other hand, it makes sense to say you paid off your guilt. When altruism becomes a commodity, it becomes guilt — it is debased. It is internalised by accounting, rather than externalised by outward, active, participatory responses. The commodification of altruism, the internalisation

of conscience, is guilt — and carbon offsetting, in this sense, can be viewed as a commodification of guilt. On the other hand, when our collective conscience radiates outward, externalised, and becomes action, that is quite possibly the most powerful force for social change imaginable.

Well, let me conclude with a few more general remarks.

One is more broadly political, and about alternatives. Today the dominant responses to climate change are very market-based ones. This is true both of offsetting, and of emissions trading, such as under the Kyoto protocol. Today we seem to be told that market forces can solve anything. But given the scale of the problem, it would be accurate, I think, to say that what we really need to do today is turn our economies on a dime, all around the world. They need to be totally restructured and re-oriented. I am not sure that markets alone can do that. This is not a matter of putting carrots in front of businesses. It's a matter of total reorientation.

Are there any precedents for this? Actually, there are: in wartime. During World War II the United States economy, and others, reoriented themselves, essentially overnight. But it was not done by market forces: it was done largely by State action. And it could not have been done any other way. Let me go further — when societies face dire, existential crises, the State is the primary actor which responds. Because the state, at least for the time being, in a democratic society is, at least nominally, subject to the control of the people. Corporations, businesses, have their own agendas and motives. This may sound outlandish: but this is exactly what has happened historically. It probably sounds outlandish only because the contemporary State, especially in the US, has been so totally captured by corporate interests. With a sense of togetherness, of the need for shared self-sacrifice, with political will, massive change can occur, virtually overnight. And the World War II analogy goes further. Because I think a Manhattan project on renewable energy, and a Marshall Plan for worldwide sustainable development, are the sort of things we need today. If nothing else, I would like you to be able to think that a much wider array of solutions exists, if only we can get out of this entire focus on market-based, ultra-capitalist ways of thinking, of which carbon offsetting is a part.

But let me finish.

Perhaps all this is a depressing critique of an industry that offers the best hope for mitigating climate change in the short term. But this isn't to say the whole idea should be dismissed. It seems there is a place for it, at least for the time being. There is no contradiction there. One can be conscious of the flaws of a project, and yet participate in it. One just has to judge that it is the least bad alternative.

And the present is, perhaps, the age of the least bad alternative. It's not an age of perfect solutions. We don't live in the Elysian fields, at least not yet! We are continually forced to choose between bad and worse, elect from the corrupt, and lurch interminably from one crisis to another. Personally, I think that carbon offsetting projects are among some least bad solution — for the time being, until we wake up and realise the scale of what is required. We should just be honest about their limitations when we use them — and, as

I've argued, honesty about limitations is actually part of what carbon offsets need to succeed in their broader goals. Even to our friends and allies in the environmental movement, in environmental work, we must be able to offer our own opinions, constructive criticism, and scepticism where necessary.

This is, after all one planet, and we are all travellers, travelling aimlessly through the void, through the galaxy, an adventure that will end, well, we don't know where. The present is a crucial time, and by acting today, we have great leverage over where we do end up, and where the human race ends up as well.