12. Flying High

From a personal standpoint, there are excellent reasons to incorporate travel into one's life. First of all, many people simply enjoy it. For many people, flying to faraway destinations is a fun and exhilarating way to spend one's vacation. For others, first-hand exposure to other cultures is a significant source of personal growth. Many people also travel to see friends and family who live across the country or around the world. And for some people, flying to and fro is simply part of the job. Travel can have a number of important benefits. Psychological research suggests that those who focus on experiences instead of material objects tend to be happier.[1] Additionally, traveling abroad is a great opportunity for learning, for cultural immersion, and for self-knowledge. It can even be life-changing. At many universities, academic advisers encourage students to travel abroad in order to expand their perspectives on the world, open their minds, and create wonderful long-lasting memories.

Yet taking a long flight is, perhaps, an individual's single largest contribution to climate change. According to one estimate, one passenger's share of emissions on a 2,500-mile flight melts 32 square feet of Arctic summer sea ice cover.[2] Taking one round-trip flight between New York and California generates about 20 percent of the greenhouse gases that one's car emits over an entire year.[3] And the problem is likely to increase over time, as passenger numbers are predicted to double to 8.2 billion by 2037.[4] For these reasons, people are increasingly deciding to limit unnecessary air travel. In some parts of Europe, this anti-flying movement is taking off. In Sweden, new words , such as "flygskam" (flying shame) and "smygflyga" (flying in secret) are being coined to express some of these anti-flying sentiments.[5] Out of a concern for her carbon footprint, teen climate activist Greta Thunberg decided to travel from Sweden to North America by boat rather than plane, in order to attend the United Nations Climate Action Summit.[6]

But even if air travel contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, many people do not see anything wrong with flying. Some might argue that climate change is a systemic problem that people have little individual influence over. On this line of thinking, even if someone decides to completely give up flying, this is not going to have any significant long-term impact on climate change. If so, one might argue that individuals do not have a moral duty to give up the benefits that air travel can bring to their lives.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What moral obligations, if any, do individuals have to reduce their carbon footprint?

2. Do the personal benefits of air travel outweigh its environmental costs?

3. Under what circumstances, if any, should people feel guilty about flying for personal enjoyment? What, if anything, would make such guilt appropriate?

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[1] https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/10/buy-experiences/381132/
[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/travel/traveling-climate-change.html
[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/27/climate/airplane-pollution-global-warming.html
[4] https://www.airlines.iata.org/news/passenger-numbers-to-hit-82bn-by-2037-iata-report
[5] https://skift.com/2019/05/28/the-anti-flying-movement-is-slowly-starting-to-hurt-european-airlines/
[6] https://www.npr.org/2019/08/28/754818342/teen-climate-activist-greta-thunberg-arrives-in-new-york-after-sailing-the-atlan