Why I should lose my job to save 3.6tn of CO2.

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I have just finished the most intensive research fieldwork of my career. I have spent 6 months in rural areas of Bougainville, an island located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, to study the relationship between exposure to globalization and climate change on one side and egalitarianism on the other. I came to Papua because it is an ideal environment to study this topic. Most communities have subsistence economy and used to share food according to egalitarian norms before markets were introduced. Market integration is still limited, though, thus making it possible to compare communities more and less exposed to the market economy. Moreover, climate change is hitting hard these areas, as sea level rise forces people living on the coast to relocate further and further inland, and as period of droughts become more intense and food becomes scarce.

The fieldwork was meant to finish at the end of July, but it took 45 days more to complete. I had to interrupt research twice for serious security threats. In one occasion, ex-combatants from the 1990-8 civil conflict arranged a roadblock, held me and my assistants hostage under machete threat, confiscated all of my belongings and asked a ransom for their release. In another occasion, we heard credible rumours that another roadblock had been planned. Some assistants confessed they used my debit card to take the equivalent of €2000 from my bank account. A large number of research items and of my belongings – from power banks to solar torches to my sweater, pants, and shampoo - went stolen. Some communities pulled out after having been initially selected, and some other communities had to be cancelled for volcanic activity. I know many researchers would have prioritized safety and would have flown home at the first security threat. I have never actually taken this option into consideration. My longing for knowledge is too high. I sampled 1814 participants from 30 villages – ranging from coastal communities connected to the main market town by tarmacked road to remote communities accessible only after several hours of walk.

I should be rejoiced about the conclusion of this fieldwork, instead I am enormously sad. Sad because last Friday the President of my Institute and the administrative director set me an ultimatum: I should be in Kiel next Monday or I’ll be fired. Being in Kiel on Monday means catching a plane, something they know I despise. Travelling by plane would produce around 4 tons of CO2 – the greenhouse gas responsible for global warming. In my outbound journey, I limited my emission to 2 tons by travelling overland and sea for 35 days over 16,0000 of the 22,000 km. In my inbound journey I plan to cover the entire distance without catching a plane, which would limit CO2 emissions to 400kg – ten times less than travelling by plane.

I do not know why my Institute set this ultimatum and set this penalty if I miss it. It is true that, according to my original plan, I should have been in Kiel on the 10th of September. It is true that I only communicated my delay to my head of area rather than the personnel department. But is this enough to lose a job? From the legal point of view, the employer can determine the place of work and can dismiss an employee if he refuses to perform work. However, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that requires my presence in Kiel. I don’t teach, I don’t have to attend seminars or other meetings. When in Kiel, I spend most of my working days alone at my office. There is nothing I must do in Kiel that I can’t do on a ship or a train while travelling. They know that I am actually very productive when I travel. As a matter of fact, I have never had a year as prolific as the current one in terms of research output. My employer may argue that slow-travel entails transiting through dangerous areas – such as Iran and Pakistan, and they would be legally responsible for whatever happens to me. Nevertheless, I offered to go on unpaid leave for as long as they deemed appropriate – the whole duration of my travel or more. That way, they would hold no legal responsibility. I put in writing that I liberated them from any responsibility for whatever happened in my travel. Even that was not enough. I should be in Kiel on Monday.

I am now faced with this dilemma. I know that most people would swallow the bitter pill and go ahead with their work – both as a professional and as an activist. My contract is under many respects fabulous. I am absolutely free to carry out the research I want – as long as it is in line with my Institute’s mission. My salary is hefty (€3,700 monthly income net of taxes) and I have 30 days of holiday per year. With this job, I have enough economic stability and spare time to pursue environmental causes.

Nevertheless, I believe that we have reached the point where this kind of instrumental rationality is no longer applicable. The most recent scientific evidence says that [we have transgressed 6 out of 9 planetary boundaries](https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458) and that [several ecosystems are close to collapse](https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abn7950) (or likely past their point of collapse) because of temperature rise - in turn caused by greenhouse gases emissions. According to a scenario evaluation by the [Hamburg Climate Futures Outlook](https://www.cliccs.uni-hamburg.de/de/results/hamburg-climate-futures-outlook.html), the goal of staying below 1.5°C, which many scientists consider a natural safety boundary for our planet, as well as being embedded in the Paris agreement - is no longer attainable. As made clear by the graph reported below, the increase in temperature we are experiencing is unprecedented and, currently, out of control.

When faced with this emergency and with what Gus Speth called the greed, indifference and apathy that characterizes the economic and political leadership as well as that of most of the public, I believe that deontological morality should be applied. If an action is intrinsically wrong, it should not be pursued. To me, catching a plane while a lower-carbon alternative exists is immoral. It is the wrong thing to do. End of story.

To be sure, there is also the hope that this kind of action will sound yet another alarm bell to the ears of an inactive political leadership and to a dormant public, who seems lethargic to the extreme weather events that become ever more numerous and intense – leaders and public who are apparently unable to connect the dots and see that such events are caused by one simple thing: Burning of fossil fuels. As a scientist, I feel I have the moral responsibility to be proactive in sounding such alarms. It is true that thus far hundreds, if not thousands, of protests have all but gone unheard and have changed very little. Nevertheless, “social tipping points” have existed for much progressive social change and things have changed rapidly for the good after a critical mass of thinking has been garnered.

Finally, there is the big disappointment to be hired by an employer that clearly does not share my values and appears willing to demand an act of submission from my side for the sake of it. It is not unthinkable that their stance is ultimately caused by my involvement in previous actions of civil disobedience, which may have been seen as bringing my Institute’s name into disrepute.

I know that my decision not to catch a plane will mean close to nothing for the protection of the environment. That plane will fly even if you have not boarded it, many people have already told me. This is true, but giving less money to the aviation industry may mean fewer planes in the future. In any case, all the science I know, all the evidence I see, point to the fact that we are in emergency. In emergency, extraordinary actions should be taken. That is why, with enormous sadness, I have decided not to take a plane and face all the consequences this will lead to. Perhaps this will mean giving up on the thing that I love the most in my life and to which I have sacrificed a lot, that is, doing research. I am prepared to pay this price, if it helps raising awareness among the public and the societal leadership on the desperate situation we are into. It is my act of love to the current and future generations, to the animal species under threat of extinction, to the idea of humanity that I instinctively and undeservedly abide by.

Some time ago I read some lines by David Maria Turoldo. “Married have I the pain / Never to be happy / As long as others are not happy”. They represent me all too well. This is painful. Sometimes I wish I could just not care about the climate breakdown. Live my remaining 30-40 years extracting as much fun as I can. Turn a blind eye on the heatwaves, the floodings, the hurricanes, the humans and non-humans dying as a consequence. To the billion more deaths that will come when temperatures exceed 1.5 °C in maybe less than ten years – a level that many climate scientists associate with a possible point of collapse for many ecosystems. Just get on with my work and have a beer afterwards. I can’t. The Greek philosopher Philolaus used to say “Some thoughts are stronger than us”. The thought of the possible loss of the civilization as we know it is strong enough for me. I won’t accept business as usual. I won’t board that plane.

