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Pipelines, provocateurs and pacifists

An examination of the defense and denunciation of violence in
climate activism

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Abstract

Would you fight climate change at any cost? In the modern day debate, opinions on the appropriate measures to draw attention to the climate crisis are divided. When conventional methods fall short, some activists resort to more assertive approaches. The green left is debating climate strategies, with intellectuals like Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg offering opposing views on the morality and effectiveness of violent measures. This essay aims to explore the intersection between ethics and climate issues by examining which normative values underpin the identified premises of arguments both in favor of and against the use of violence in climate activism. The results give us cause to assume that despite apparent differences, Malm and Hornborg hold similar foundational values. What instead ultimately separates them may hold the key to understanding why having a fruitful debate on climate activism proves challenging.

Key words: Climate change, climate activism, violence, nonviolence, deontology, consequentialism, values, ethics.

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1. Introduction

Climate change is an urgent global challenge that demands immediate action. This message has resonated through the decades, articulated by influential figures like Al Gore, Naomi Klein, and Greta Thunberg, as well as climate activist groups like Extinction Rebellion and Swedish Återställ Våtmarker. Among these groups, civil disobedience has emerged as a prominent strategy, serving as a peaceful tool for shaping public opinion and advocating systemic change. However, there have also been violent tendencies within certain factions of the climate activism movement, garnering significant media coverage and sparking extensive debates about the pros and cons of activism. Do we battle climate change at any cost, or are there some non-negotiable moral principles who rightfully prohibit us from effectively stopping the destruction of our planet in time? What factors govern the effectiveness of activism; and perhaps more importantly, does the degree of success impact its moral justification? Before we can begin to answer these questions, I would like to illustrate how the past decades of climate change politics have brought us a situation where perspectives on the appropriate measures to draw attention to the climate crisis are divided, not only among civilians and politicians, but also among prominent academic figures in the field of climate change politics.

1.1. 30 years of climate politics

Over the past decades, the politics of climate change has undergone significant shifts, marked by evolving international agreements, growing public awareness, and changing policy landscapes. The period has witnessed a transition from early recognition of the issue to a more urgent and coordinated global response. Despite scientists dedicating over a century to studying the factors shaping climate change, it wasn't until the mid- to late 1980s that the subject gained prominence as a significant political issue. (Kellogg, 1987) The escalating recognition of climate change not only propelled it into the forefront of political agendas but also spurred a parallel growth in social science research. The late 1980s marked the onset of an era where climate change became a focal point, not only in political discourse, but in the expanding domain of scholarly investigations into global environmental politics (Stevis, 2014).

The initial years, up to the early 1990s, were characterized by a gradual acknowledgment of the environmental impact of human activities, leading to the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) emerged in 1992 as a pivotal milestone, setting the stage for international collaboration. In the 1980s and 1990s, our approach to greenhouse and carbon emissions mirrored our handling of other forms of air pollution, akin to clean air acts. The framing and comprehension of these issues dictated specific responses—mainly, the control and reduction of emissions, exemplified by initiatives like carbon pricing. This framework dominated for a considerable period, essentially until 2009, emphasizing cost efficiency as a central consideration. (Bulkeley & Newell, 2023) At this point in time, the need for prompt action has not yet reached a level of urgency that sparks a need for more drastic measures amongst a significant number of climate activists. The 20th century witnessed various social and political movements, such as civil rights movements and animal rights movements. However, the form of activism driving societal or political change has not fully manifested in the climate movement. Consequently, the moral dilemmas subject to debate in this field have yet to be firmly established. Nonetheless, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the Kyoto Protocol (1997), a landmark treaty that committed developed nations to specific emissions reduction targets. However, its limitations, including the absence of binding commitments for developing countries and the withdrawal of the United States, underscored the challenges in achieving global consensus. The latter part of the 2000s marked a period of growing awareness and sense of urgency amongst more people engaged in the climate change debate. For example, the IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report (2007) which emphasized the unequivocal evidence of human-induced climate change; and the Copenhagen Summit (2009) that aimed to produce a comprehensive global agreement but fell short of expectations, leading to increased skepticism about the effectiveness of international negotiations. This skepticism is one of the various factors contributing to the rise of the modern climate debate that serves as a backdrop for morally debated actions, forming the foundation of this essay. A common opinion is that the issue has not been treated seriously, lacking adequate attention and the necessary cooperation among world leaders—elements essential for heightened protests and the implementation of drastic measures to instigate political change. If the system is not working, we are urged to change it.

So, what has happened during the last decade leading up to present time? Has the field of climate politics undergone sufficient changes for climate activists to bring about effective

change? During the 2010s, there was a notable transition toward more inclusive strategies in addressing climate change. The Paris Agreement of 2015 marked a significant milestone, as almost 200 nations pledged to restrict global temperature rises. (UNFCCC, 2023) This represented a departure from the previous top-down approach, emphasizing individually determined contributions and adaptability. Concurrently, non-state actors such as businesses, cities, and civil society gained increased visibility. The emerging paradigm reframed climate change as a decarbonization challenge, emphasizing a transition rather than end-of-pipe solutions. This broader outlook directs attention to multidimensionality, social systems, urban planning, and societal development. Undertaking this transformation represents a more intricate task as it involves systemic changes. Consider the dependence on cars as transport to demonstrate the complex challenges tied to changing well-established systems. In many cities and suburbs of the developed nations, habitants depend entirely on the ability to drive everyday. Here, the philosophical matter of quality of life makes its way into the debate. In the realm of consequentialism, the focus shifts to examining the outcomes of climate change on our quality of life and the repercussions of climate change prevention efforts. This prompts a contemplation of what constitutes a good or sufficient life and necessitates a delicate balance between present and future human suffering or well-being, something that has been proven difficult. As expected, the 2018 IPCC Special Report on 1.5 degrees (SR15) indicates that constraining global warming to 1.5 degrees demands “transformative systemic change”. Is this enough cause for celebration? Although some countries are making progress in transitioning, meeting this goal necessitates a more accelerated and extensive change across all sectors of the economy. (IPCC, 2018) But the politics of climate change is not solely a matter of economic, scientific and scholarly investigations. This field of politics has seen an incredible surge in activism and emotional reactions, especially in the youth.

Climate activism, exemplified by movements like Fridays for Future, intensified the demand for immediate action, exerting influence on political agendas worldwide. The youth, as a demographic group, encompasses a variety of beliefs, values, worldviews, and expectations regarding the future. Additionally, there are diverse perceptions of agency and responsibility within this demographic. Framing climate change as an imminent environmental disaster may foster feelings of despair and helplessness, especially among those who will live to see it. This can in turn result in apathy or a perceived inability to impact sustainability outcomes. Although, positive framings do seem to have the opposite effect, with the potential to instill hope and engagement. (Schreiner and Sjøberg 2005, Ojala 2015). Youths are not just passive

recipients of decisions made by older generations; they are active stakeholders in shaping their future. Frustration with perceived inaction can fuel a sense of desperation. On a more speculative than historical note, I claim that it would not be hard to imagine how the perceived severity and immediacy of the climate crisis could contribute to a heightened emotional response, which could cause climate activists to be more desperate in their manners. When traditional channels for addressing climate concerns appear inadequate, people may resort to more assertive and attention-grabbing methods. This initiates a different philosophical investigation, now centered not on the outcomes of an action but on the inherent goodness of acting virtuously within the framework of deontology. In this context, the emphasis lies on the duty-bound nature of ethical principles – e.g. the principle of nonviolence – raising questions about the inherent right- or wrongness associated with adhering to prescribed moral rules and duties, irrespective of the consequences. In recent years, provoking literature has emerged on the market. "How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire" is a 2021 nonfiction work by Andreas Malm where he criticizes pacifism and contends that sabotage is a rational approach to climate activism. At what point do we escalate? Can the threat and urgency of climate change justify blowing up a pipeline or causing harm and destruction on other material things? Some argue it does with reference to the positive outcomes on saving the planet, while others stand firmly by their ethical principles claiming it simply never can be justified to use violence, despite positive consequences.

In the present day, the green left is engaged in a vital debate on tackling climate change, with intellectuals like Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg offering key perspectives. Malm advocates for physical attacks on environmentally harmful entities, while Hornborg emphasizes that the climate crisis is deeply rooted in the fossil energy essential to billions of people. Within the climate movement, with initiatives like Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion, vandalism has been strictly condemned. But the ongoing frustration with the unaltered trajectory of carbon dioxide levels is still clear. Over the past 30 years, the Conference of the Parties (COP) has annually brought together members to discuss ambition, responsibility and assess climate measures and the impacts of climate change.

In December 2023, COP28 was ended on the note that this conference brought about “an enhanced, balanced and historic package to accelerate climate action”. (COP28, 2023) While this agreement stresses the importance of a rapid transition, there are still some lingering

concerns regarding the effectiveness of the proposed changes. The ongoing frustration surrounding the unchanged trajectory of carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere highlights the fact that previous attempts to shift towards sustainable environmental practices have not unfolded as expected. Signaling during COP28 that this is the “beginning of the end” (UNFCCC, 2023) of the fossil fuel era suggests that there might be a symbolic shift happening, but the call for turning pledges into real outcomes without delay is still loud and present. Progress is not happening as quickly as desired. Facing out carbon consumption in a widespread consensus is not what this meeting brought us, as some member states had hoped, but rather a compromised plan for transitioning away from carbon-heavy practices that falls short of the urgency required for the immediate measures that need to be taken.

What we can observe over the past decades of climate policy is a pattern of recurring defeats and disappointments among the guardians of the climate regarding which measures are taken and upheld to prevent the breakdown of our planet. There is a palpable sense of urgency in addressing the imminent threats of climate change, and the perceived lack of decisive action is seen as a setback in the global effort to confront environmental challenges. The unmet expectations for bold and immediate steps to mitigate the impact of carbon emissions on the planet contribute to the frustration felt by climate defenders and activists. Given these circumstances, concerns about the potential consequences are likely to be expressed with frustration. In a scenario where voices go unheard for several decades, some may argue that resorting to violence is not as random and uncivilized as it might be perceived. Andreas Malm is a leading voice in this claim, he aims to challenge the zero-tolerance for violence within the climate movement, questioning the notion that one can never deviate from absolute nonviolence. But even individuals who obtain from carbon heavy activities and products are unavoidably entangled in the global metabolism that sustains us with essentials like food, healthcare and electricity. Sabotaging components of this metabolism risks disproportionately impacting those with fewer resources to offset the damages. This is what underscores the non-negotiable nature of the principle of nonviolence according to Hornborg. Malm and Hornborg’s opposing moral stands on the issue of how far we should go when trying to drive attention to solving the climate crisis will ultimately be the overarching framework of this essay. Could acts of violence be the solution, as proposed by Andreas Malm (2020)? Or is resorting to violence merely acknowledging that the analytical tools at one’s disposal is insufficient, as claimed by Alf Hornborg (2020)?

1.2. Purpose

A modern debate has been initiated surrounding the necessity of embracing a more forceful and violent form of activism. Those actively involved in this discourse endeavor to articulate a rationale for such advocacy, challenging conventional norms and expanding the acceptable boundaries. The purpose of the essay is to examine the arguments of this debate and bring to light the ethical assumptions of those boundaries that are often implicit. In other words, I intend to examine the underlying premises of the arguments for and against use of violence in climate activism. In this manner, I embark on a political-philosophical analysis of a contemporary concern highly relevant to the field of political science in the present and the foreseeable future. This essay aims to dissect the ethical foundations of arguments concerning the utilization of violence in climate activism, delving into both supporting and opposing perspectives, in this case embodied by Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg. By scrutinizing these ethical assumptions, the study seeks to uncover how they shape the development and implementation of strategies and tactics employed by climate activists and defended by scholars of political science. Past discussions on violence and nonviolence, particularly in contexts like animal rights, may not directly apply to the unique nature of the climate issue. The distinction stems from the differing moral status attributed to humans and animals. In the realm of climate change, moral discussions revolve around humans as moral actors and recipients of the consequences of their actions. In contrast, animal rights issues depict animals with varying moral statuses that are always lesser than that of humans, and as non-moral actors incapable of ethical agency. In animal rights discussions, the moral debates therefore often center on different arguments and premises related to human treatment of animals. The crux of the matter in climate discussions, and the reason why ethical conclusions from similar issues can not be directly transferred to this matter is that it revolves around the moral status of humans, who are both contributors to and victims of the climate crisis. There are conflicting perspectives on the ethical responsibilities of individuals in addressing climate issues and the methods in which they do so. This study primarily seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the intersection between ethics and climate issues, and while offering a valuable addition to the existing body of literature I aim to emphasize the need for ongoing ethical reflection in the face of contemporary crises and offer an opportunity to explore how ethical frameworks adapt or fall short in response to changing circumstances.

1.3. Research questions

To fulfill the purpose of this essay, the following question will be subject for examination:

1. What are the premises in the arguments presented by Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, both in favor of and against the use of violent measures in climate activism?
2. Which values underpin the identified premises, and what distinctions exist in these values between the respective standpoints?

1.4. Framing the thesis

With this normative analysis, I aspire to unravel not only the philosophical underpinnings of these ethical considerations but also their practical manifestations in the climate activist landscape. By doing this, the essay endeavors to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between ethics, strategy, and the effectiveness of climate activism. To effectively fulfill its purpose, this essay will not delve into specific acts of violence or provide a particularly comprehensive historical account of climate activism and the moral justification of the field as a whole. It will also refrain from offering a definitive judgment on the efficacy of violence in achieving climate-related goals, since the primary goal is to unravel the premises on which the arguments for justification through urgency and the principle of nonviolence rests upon. Additionally, the essay will not analyze unrelated philosophical or political ideologies linked to climate activism. Although there are many that would have made great contributions to this field of research, they have to be excluded in order for an essay of this size to be comprehensive and contributory.

2. Background

In order to engage in a meaningful discourse, a few elements need to be clarified and brought up for consideration before taking on the task to analyze the concept of violence in climate activism. This section aims to elucidate the nature of activism, if and how it can be done in an effective manner, and where the line is drawn between what qualifies as violent and nonviolent activism.

2.1 The act and art of activism

Activism can take many forms and be expressed in different ways. Regardless of its manifestation, individuals involved in collective action all seem to share a common aspiration: to contribute to the creation, celebration, or resistance of social change. In this manner, climate activists aim to draw attention to the urgency of addressing climate change, advocating for policies that reduce carbon emissions, protect natural ecosystems, and promote renewable energy sources. The movement encompasses a broad range of approaches, from peaceful demonstrations and grassroots initiatives to legal and policy advocacy. The goal is to mobilize public support and influence decision-makers to take meaningful action to mitigate the impacts of climate change and transition to a more sustainable and environmentally friendly future.

A significant portion of the environmental movement's historical and contemporary endeavors is driven not only by a commitment to nature but also by an aspiration for societal betterment. Advocates argue that environmental conservation goes hand in hand with ensuring the well-being of the human race. By prioritizing the protection of the environment, the movement seeks to create a sustainable and harmonious coexistence between humanity and the planet. In other words, safeguarding the environment is seen as a means to protect the human race. (Marangudakis, 2001) Within the modern environmental justice movement, there is a heightened emphasis on unveiling the intersections between environmental issues and disparities in social well-being. Activists argue that marginalized communities often bear a disproportionate burden of environmental degradation, further exacerbating existing social inequalities. By illuminating these connections, the movement advocates for policies and initiatives that address both environmental concerns and the social injustices intertwined with them. Similar to any manifestation of political behavior, the environmental movement is not homogenous; instead, it spans a spectrum. Most of the prominent and widely recognized groups operate within the established system, employing educational initiatives, financial resources, and political lobbying as strategies to influence attitudes and policies (Christiansen, 2009).

2.2. Effective activism

Is there such a thing as effective climate activism? Gulliver et al. (2021) refers to the concept of 'effectiveness' in collective action as the degree to which a single action or a series of actions achieves intended goals. In theory, this definition appears straightforward, but its practical application becomes challenging due to the diverse range of goals individuals and groups may have for a single collective action or a sustained series of actions. These goals can vary widely, encompassing objectives such as preventing a war, establishing a transformative movement, or experiencing a sense of meaningful belonging. The authors explored the varied interpretations of effectiveness, recognizing that conceptualizations of effectiveness can differ based on activists' distinct instrumental and symbolic objectives, the chosen tactics for collective action in pursuit of these goals, and the specific audiences targeted by the collective action. The findings highlight that while collective activism can facilitate solutions, it also has the potential for stalemates and polarizing conflicts. These insights underscore the significance of understanding the processes behind collective action and new social movements of the 21st century and concerns such as the climate crisis.

Thomas & Louis (2014) points out that while the psychological literature interested in the motivations of participation in collective action has had an increasing growth, the effectiveness of such actions has rarely been researched. So while this field of social science has made progress in describing the motivating factors of collective action, the consequences of collective protest actions remain relatively unknown. For achieving broader social change goals, the effectiveness of collective action hinges on its impact on public opinion. Findings of Thomas & Louis (2014) suggest that nonviolent actions enhance movement mobilization by boosting the group's "coping potential" through external blame attribution, fostering action readiness, and promoting efforts to change the status of a disadvantaged ingroup. Nonviolent protests propagate legitimating ideology, exposing illegitimacy and instability. Little support was found for the strategic use of violence.

Recent insights from the fields of sociology and political science propose that the success or failure of protests in achieving their stated goals may be closely tied to how much these events influence public opinion. Burstein (2003) considers the impact of public opinion on public policy, asking questions regarding the extent of the impact, the increase as the salience of issues increases and to what extent it can be negated by for instance social movement organizations, interest groups or political parties. This review concluded that the impact of

public opinion on public policy is indeed substantial. The same conclusion is made by Burstein & Lipton (2002) in their examination of the direct influence of political parties, interest groups, and social movement organizations (SMOs) on policy. The core hypothesis suggests substantial impacts on policy by all three organization types.

2.3. Violent activism

Violent activism, which is also often used synonymously with militant activism or radical activism, refers in this essay to the use of force, aggression, or physical violence as a means to promote a particular cause, ideology, or social or political change. It often sparks controversy as it raises ethical questions about the efficacy and morality of using violence in pursuit of change for the better. As mentioned in a previous sections, climate activism refers to the efforts and actions taken by individuals, groups, or movements to address and raise awareness about climate change issues. Violent climate activism refers in this case to the use of force, aggression, or destructive methods by individuals or groups within the climate activism movement to advance their environmental goals. This can include acts of vandalism, sabotage, destruction of property, or other violent actions carried out in the name of addressing climate change or environmental issues. While the broader climate activism movement typically emphasizes peaceful and nonviolent strategies to bring about change, instances of violent climate activism involve the use of force, which can be controversial and may have legal and ethical implications.

2.4. Nonviolent activism

Nonviolent activism, which is also commonly known as nonviolent resistance or civil resistance, is a form of social or political action that seeks to bring about change through peaceful means. In more broad terms, it involves strategic, organized efforts of protests and civil obedience to challenge and address social, political, or environmental issues without resorting to physical violence or harm. Many organized groups of climate activists employ this method (Återställ Våtmarker n.d., Extinction Rebellion 2023) and express the goal to put moral pressure on policymakers (Fridays For Future, 2023). Other prominent historical figures known to many people – even those generally uninterested in political science – such

as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., are often associated with successful nonviolent movements. The purpose of civil disobedience is typically rooted in the desire to bring attention to injustice and challenge existing laws in order to provoke societal change. The aim is to highlight moral or ethical concerns and prompt authorities to address them. But, are protestors seeking to alter the moral convictions of those in power, or are they primarily focused on increasing public awareness, trusting that the public's moral compass is already aligned with climate-conscious directions? As we will unravel in later sections explaining the analysis of normative concepts, values serve as guiding principles that influence how concepts are defined and applied in a given context. By examining the underlying values, we can gain insights into the ethical principles that shape the normative landscape that is climate activism. Specific traits are often highlighted as essential for an act of civil disobedience to be considered justifiable. These traits differ in debates, but one frequently mentioned is nonviolence (Morreall, 1976). Nonviolence is often cited as a key criterion in discussions of civil disobedience. While some have argued that nonviolence is a prerequisite for an act to at all qualify as civil disobedience (Bedau, 1961), others acknowledge the possibility of acts of civil disobedience to be violent, but also that it lacks moral justification (Bayles, 1970).

3. Theoretical framework

This section will explore deontology and consequentialism as fundamental ethical perspectives shaping the analysis of the arguments defending or denouncing violence in climate activism. Deontology relies on predefined principles, while consequentialism evaluates actions based on their outcomes. As we will discover later on, this goes hand in hand with the arguments expressed by Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg and will act as a theoretical foundation that sets the stage for the forthcoming analysis.

3.1. Consequentialism

Consequentialism centers on evaluating the moral nature of an action based on its outcomes, emphasizing that there are no inherently good or evil actions; rather, it is the consequences that hold significance – the means are justified by the ends. However, this justification is not boundless; consequentialism is not devoid of discernment. An action is considered desirable

only if it generates an equal or greater surplus of good over evil compared to any other available course of action (Badersten 2006, p.114). Consequentialism outlines the criteria for evaluating something but remains silent on the specific values to be prioritized. Assessing the consequences of various courses of action, particularly over the long term, is often a formidable challenge. Is it truly possible to believe that, in intricate societal matters, one can comprehensively gauge the consequences of all alternatives at any given moment, both in the short and long run? Another commonly voiced objection to consequentialism is the intuitive unease many experience towards a principle asserting that ends always justify means, suggesting that anything is acceptable if it yields positive outcomes, according to Badersten (ibid., p.117). Does this not push the boundaries of morality? Some might claim it does, but for consequentialists the focus remains on achieving the greatest overall good, even in situations where predicting every consequence is difficult, and underscores the importance of maximizing overall well-being.

3.2. Deontology

Act only according to a principle that you can simultaneously will to become a universal law. The renowned categorical imperative, as articulated by Kant (1997), is arguably one of the most famous principles of action in modern philosophy. Its categorical nature implies that it is unconditionally obligatory for us as human beings to act according to the established moral virtues. The fundamental idea is that if you cannot desire that an action be universally accepted as a law, you should refrain from performing the action. Kant also introduces the concept of hypothetical imperatives, which, in contrast to the unconditional command of the categorical imperative, guides individuals based on their specific goals. They have the form “Do this in order to get that”; e.g. “I should eat to get rid of my hunger” or “We should perform a school strike in order to raise awareness for the climate”. In contrast, a categorical imperative is an absolute, unconditional command that must be followed in all situations, justified as an end in itself with intrinsic value beyond mere desirability (Norman, 1998:75). Deontology underscores that certain actions are inherently justifiable or wrongful, irrespective of their consequences. In essence, it asserts that certain actions are morally right by virtue of the obligation to perform them, rather than by evaluating their outcomes, in contrast to consequentialism (Badersten 2006, p.110). The essence of deontological reasoning is sticking to a set of fixed values or principles that are considered inviolable and should

always be protected. Any transgressions against these values and principles must be condemned. This type of reasoning doesn't tell us what values are good, bad, desirable or objectionable; rather, it solely outlines the reasoning process, which constitutes the focal point of this essay (ibid., p.112).

4. Method and material

Intriguing research questions and a fitting theoretical framework is a good start for any essay, but how do one go about finding the answers from there? To find out which underlying assumptions justifies och illegitimizes violent acts of climate activism, a normative analysis is favorable. More specifically, a normative concept analysis.

4.1. Normative concept analysis

Normative questions aim to explore how something should be and how this can be justified. What criteria can we use to judge whether a particular action or state is justified or condemnable? Or, an alternative way of approaching the question: What causes us to reach varying conclusions in matters of values? This analytical approach essentially grapples with the definition of a value – an entity deemed either virtuous or objectionable. It is natural to wonder whether it is possible to adopt scientific positions regarding matters of value. Can science provide answers to "ought" questions, ethics, or the good society? In politics, it is necessary to prioritize between different values. For that matter, one could claim it appears paradoxical if political scientists cannot take a stance on such questions. Still, the process of problematizing and taking a stance on matters of value on scientific grounds requires careful reflection and methodical analysis. It involves using scientific methods to explore and understand different perspectives and critically examining and evaluating the values underlying various positions. So, when examining the moral justification or condemnation of a specific action or state, we delve into the fundamental exploration of political values. Normative analysis is a nuanced undertaking that relies on the existence of such values, much like how empirical analysis requires a tangible reality. Therefore, the recurring question emerges: why do divergent perspectives arise in discussions laden with values? The answer lies in the divergence of our starting points, rooted in distinct political values. The conflicting

moral stances described within the movement of climate change activism is not an exception to this.

Normative concept analysis is a fundamental prerequisite for any form of normative analysis as it clarifies the true meaning of these values. The process involves specifying and elucidating the meaning of values and normative concepts, comparing definitions, testing the compatibility between concepts, and making visible value hierarchies and conflicts between values (Badersten, 2006) This method of analysis is marked by impartiality, a critical perspective, and an emphasis on addressing problems rather than promoting particular values. The role of the concept analyst is to serve as a type of analytical refinement. It is also not uncommon for studies of this kind to exhibit clear comparative elements. In this investigation, I will compare the concept of justification through urgency, embodied by Andreas Malm, and the principle of nonviolence, defended and advocated by Alf Hornborg as a response to Malm's statements about the need for what I have defined as violent activism. How these concepts are expressed in the literature, including the exchange of views between Malm and Hornborg – particularly covered in Swedish media (Larsson 2020 & Hornborg 2020) – will be described in the following sections.

5. Analysis

We have now reached the part where I will go through with the examination of the ethical premises of the arguments for justification through urgency and the principle of nonviolence. How does Malm and Hornborg arrive at their separate conclusions when it comes to justifying methods of climate activism? Are the conclusions opposable, or is there something else, something fundamentally philosophical or normative, that causes them to reach different conclusion on a subject that they otherwise stand together on? This next section seeks to answer these questions.

5.1. Justification through urgency

In the context of this essay, justification through urgency entails using the sense of immediacy as a rationale for specific actions or measures of climate protesting. Cassegård &

Thörn (2022) points out that the apocalyptic narrative has been a focal point in the environmental movement post-World War II. The narrative revolves around the fear of an impending future, yet this fear is interwoven with the hope that catastrophe can still be averted, although extreme measures might be needed to do so. Within many aspects of the climate justice movement's narrative, it is not humanity but capitalism that has brought the planet to the verge of collapse. Furthermore, it is not humanity but rather an alliance between climate science and the climate movement that embodies the potential to avert such a catastrophe. The climate justice movement surfaced within the realm of global climate activism, presenting a distinct apocalyptic narrative distinguished by feelings of anger rather than fear. Andreas Malm expressed this viewpoint in his 2007 book, *It is our definite opinion that if nothing is done now it will be too late*. Malm argued that delays had been too extensive, emphasizing the urgency for an uncompromising attack on fossil fuels — a revolution (Malm, 2007).

There are, of course, many ways to refer to urgency to justify actions. In personal contexts, urgency can be invoked to rationalize actions, particularly in scenarios where there's insufficient time for contemplating moral guidelines, obligations, or anticipating consequences before swiftly deciding to act for the greater good. Consider a situation where a person witnesses a child in immediate danger, like drowning in a pool. In the urgency of the moment, as the person swiftly rescues the child, they inadvertently damage someone else's property nearby. The action of saving the child, while morally commendable in the context of urgency, unintentionally leads to a morally questionable consequence. This scenario highlights the ethical complexities that can arise when urgency takes precedence over careful moral deliberation. Could the child have been rescued without property damage? Very few would argue that the person in this scenario should have hesitated and thought of the consequences of their actions or planned for a way to save the child without doing any harm. But that is because arranging the conflicting values in this case is not particularly challenging for most moral actors. Not many would question that a child's life is worth more than a piece of private property. But there are instances where solutions to value conflicts are less obvious. In early 2020, the world witnessed the unprecedented crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Justification through urgency became a focal point during this time, sparking a profound debate on the values of freedom, safety, and urgency. While some prioritize freedom and autonomy above all, others argue that safety and health should take precedence. The urgency to address the crisis prompted varying justifications, emphasizing the complex interplay

between values in the pressing need for swift action – similar to the dynamics observed in the climate crisis debate I seek to observe.

5.1.1. The defense of violence in climate activism

The concept of violence is complex, and its values and norms can vary across different cultural, historical, and social contexts. It is important to note that perspectives on violence are very diverse, and individuals and societies might hold differing views on the acceptability and justifiability of violent actions based on their cultural or moral frameworks. It is also crucial to recognize that these differences do not imply that a singular right or wrong perspective on violence can be found. In order to draw valuable conclusions about these foundational values, the next step would entail evaluating the content of specific arguments. For arguments in favor of violence in climate activism, we look to Malm's suggestions on how violence might bring about positive and necessary changes. When looking for explicit and implicit statements about what is considered ethical or desirable in relation to the concept of violence, we can find a number of examples where Malm expresses a clear view of what ought to be morally prioritized. When asked by journalist Petter Larsson about the new wave of climate activism that has gained momentum over the last decade and whether there is a risk for it to be delegitimized because of property damage caused by blowing up pipelines, Malm answers:

“I don’t deny that there are risks. But my assessment is that we are in such an extreme situation that we can no longer afford to rely solely on risk-free methods.”

(Larsson, 2020)

His statement suggests that, given the urgency of the climate crisis, relying solely on risk-free methods is no longer feasible. This implies an endorsement of more forceful and risk-laden strategies as ethically justifiable, based upon the claim that the negative consequences of climate change surpasses the harm of using violence on inanimate objects and infrastructure with symbolic or practical importance for the system that is causing the defeat of our climate. However, Malm also goes on to say:

"When victories can be achieved through nonviolence, without any property destruction, it's truly fantastic. There's no reason to fetishize militant resistance."

(Larsson, 2020)

Here, a positive stance towards nonviolence as an effective means to achieve victories is articulated. The reader should be aware that Malm is not an advocate for violence in general, but that ethical preference for nonviolent methods that avoid property destruction has been overridden by the urgency of climate change. The caution against glorifying or overly emphasizing violent approaches expressed in his argumentation gives us reason to assume that the premises that underlie it are seeking to maximize well being and minimize harm.

This causes me to label two categories that I think perfectly sums up the premises of which the argument defending violence in climate activism is based upon: consequentialist maximization and mitigation of harm. The category of consequentialist maximization centers on the principle that ethical actions should strive to effectively maximize overall positive outcomes. In the context of climate activism, this suggests that all actions should be evaluated on their ability to generate the best possible outcome for the climate and the quality of life of the living beings affected by climate change. For the category of mitigation of harm, the emphasis is on the importance of avoiding actions that lead to negative impacts, and in particular those that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, highlighting values like justice and well-being. So in brief summary, how does Malm arrive at his conclusion that violence in climate activism is just? In accordance with the principles of consequentialism, the justification rests upon the possibility for violence to yield positive outcomes deemed necessary for addressing urgent environmental concerns, even as it acknowledges the risks and potential harm associated with such actions.

Critique has of course been circulating Malm's statements apart from the complete opposition made up by Hornborg and other like-minded. This criticism is often directed at the lack of insight into how narrow the margins of the approach advocated by Malm are, and how easily one could slip onto a path where the consequences are significantly worse due to the use of violence than if no violence had been used at all; which, if readers need reminded, violates the fundamental principle of consequentialism which states that an action is justified only if it yields equivalent or superior outcomes compared to any alternative. For example, fossil fuel and prison abolition activist and founder of the Climate Disobedience Center Tim DeChristopher (2021) argues that Malm's perspective on the ethics of violence in climate activism requires great caution. The climate movement is already in many instances

infiltrated by agents trying to incite acts that can be labeled as terrorism in order to undermine it. Thus, the commitment to nonviolence has been a crucial defense, according to DeCristopher. Malm acknowledges property destruction as a form of violence but highlights its distinction from harm to humans or animals. If this commitment waivers, an equally clear line to distinguish between property and life needs to be established. In this context, the distinction between a just and unjust application of violence appears delicate, with conflicting values easily emerging. But Malm in turn stresses the need to navigate public sentiment and promotes ‘collective self-discipline.’ (Larsson, 2020) He warns against extreme actions that could trigger counterproductive reactions, rejects radical ideologies, and suggests that intelligent sabotage may become acceptable as societal breakdown intensifies.

5.2. The principle of nonviolence

Nonviolence is an individual practice focused on refraining from causing harm to others, guided by the belief that achieving objectives doesn't require harming people, animals, or the environment. For many, this evokes thoughts of Gandhian nonviolence, rooted in ethical principles rather than political strategy. But it is essential to distinguish between principled and pragmatic nonviolent approaches, as they may vary in motives, goals, philosophies, and strategies. While both advocate for nonviolence, they provide alternative paths for those seeking to avoid violence. This distinction is crucial not only in personal conduct but also in the realm of political activism, where understanding these differences can prevent confusion and ensure the effectiveness of nonviolent principles in pursuing social and political change. To illustrate this distinction we can look back at the civil rights movement in the United States during the mid-20th century where Martin Luther King Jr. adhered to principled nonviolence rooted in ethical principles. This approach emphasized the moral imperative of equality and justice while advocating for nonviolent resistance to achieve civil rights. On the other hand, the Black Panthers represented a more pragmatic approach to nonviolence. Although they shared the overarching goal of combating racial injustice, the Black Panthers employed strategies that included self-defense and, at times, confrontational tactics.

5.2.1. The denunciation of violence in climate activism

Why is it impossible that acts of violence are the solution? Hornborg's main objection stems from a skepticism regarding the effectiveness of violence as a way to separate fossil-fuel-driven infrastructure from the intricacies of all of our daily lives. Due to the fact that these are deeply intertwined, a sabotage on the scale that Malm deems impactful would ultimately, and indiscriminately, affect both the extravagant consumers that Malm seems to be targeting and the most vulnerable. Hornborg expresses his concern in a Swedish newspaper with the following statement:

“Even individuals who never fly and lack car ownership are entangled in the 90% fossil-fuel-driven global metabolism that supplies us with necessities like food, healthcare, electricity, and communications. Sabotaging specific elements within this metabolism poses a risk of disproportionately impacting those with the least ability to mitigate the resulting damages. Therefore, the principle of non-violence remains non-negotiable.”

(Hornborg in *Sydsvenskan*, 2020)

What is mentioned about sabotage and its potential consequences aligns with the theory of consequentialism, emphasizing that despite well-intentioned motives for using violence, the ultimate effects are by Hornborg anticipated to be more detrimental compared to alternative courses of action. As mentioned in section 2.2. regarding the effectiveness of activism, preserving the environment is considered a strategy to ensure the well-being of humanity. The increased focus on revealing the connections between environmental issues and disparities in social welfare is manifested in Hornborg's argument about the risk of disproportionately impacting those with poorer abilities to handle damages caused by violent activism. Disadvantaged communities frequently experience an unequal share of environmental degradation that intensifies pre-existing inequities. However, this does not theoretically contradict Malm, who in turn argues that no direct harm be done to any living being, only infrastructure (Larsson, 2020). Malm is under the impression that no significant harm is caused to those already disadvantaged. Thus, both Hornborg and Malm prioritize the well-being of the less fortunate, but with opposable approaches. Malm suggests targeting and holding the elite accountable, while Hornborg contends that such actions could worsen existing inequalities. So while Malm and Hornborg appear to diverge in their arguments at this juncture, they actually share similar ethical perspectives about the importance of the

consequences of climate activism. As we know by now, their disparity lies mainly in their approaches to achieving those shared goals. Another clear example of this is the subsequent statement by Hornborg:

“One thing is certain, though: However much we desire the world to comply with our demands, we cannot force it. In this regard, sabotage is as futile as fascism. Attempting to compel the fossil fuel society into transition through violence will likely only cause it to, much like a clam, tightly close itself against its challengers.”

(Hornborg, 2020)

As we have noticed, Hornborg emphasizes that the climate crisis is not solely about a small elite benefiting at the expense of the planet. He questions Malm’s tactic of blowing up gas pipelines, warning about the risk of triggering a response where the masses defend their interests in a manner that could lead to unintended consequences. Furthermore, Hornborg seems to argue that no remedy will likely be found for the situation, even amongst economists and technologists. The gravity of this situation requires a fresh perspective on money, energy and technology (Hornborg, 2020). The risky path humanity is on is not an unavoidable path; rather, it is a result of getting caught up in a global scenario where disaster appears predetermined. If you were to ask him, the objective of social science research is simply to unravel the complexities behind our seemingly unstoppable trajectory towards crisis. Adopting violence equates to succumbing to the mysterious nature of society, recognizing that the currently available analytical tools are inadequate for understanding it fully. Hornborg’s argument seems to stem from an assumption that violence is an ineffective form of activism. The referenced ineffectiveness, above illustrated with the clam-metaphor, is relevant for arguing in a consequentialist manner. We have previously established that consequentialists prioritize achieving the maximum overall good, even in scenarios where predicting every consequence is challenging, highlighting the significance of maximizing overall well-being as a central guiding principle. On this note, I would like to propose that the denunciation and defense of violence in climate activism differ in one evident aspect within the theoretical framework of consequentialism: the subjects of moral worth in the climate crisis.

In Hornborg’s case, the argument emphasizes the importance of the living beings of the overseeable future, asserting that their well-being is paramount. From this perspective, one

might conclude that violence is non-negotiable in climate activism because it causes more harm than alternative non-violent approaches due to the risk of social injustice, increased fascism and the fossil fuel industry tightly closing itself against challengers. Conversely, Malm's argument may implicitly highlight the significance of future generations. Advocates of this viewpoint might argue that violent activism is morally defensible due to its potential and likely positive consequences over time. In this case, the emphasis is on the long-term benefits that violent actions might bring about, such as systemic change leading to a more sustainable and just world for future generations. These differing moral values showcase the complex nature of ethical reasoning within the consequentialist framework, where the evaluation of actions depends on their consequences and the temporal scope of those consequences. I believe that due to the nature of consequentialist theory, thinkers like Malm and Hornborg cannot develop a fruitful discourse based on arguments related to measurable consequences without agreeing on a determined time-period, something that has been proven difficult in other consequentialist discussions. However, there are more interesting observations to be made about this debate.

In addition to the consequentialist response to Malm, Hornborg invokes the deontological approach, advocating for nonviolence as a categorical imperative. In the theoretical chapter of this essay, Kant's categorical imperative was mentioned as a popular example of a way to evaluate the motives of an action, with the core concept being that if you cannot wish for an action to be universally adopted as law, you should obtain from carrying out that action. According to Norman (1998, 72), Kant would argue that only a good will is unconditionally good, and its value is distinct from the outcomes it produces. This assertion is plausible because moral judgments often center on people's intentions. So the absence of violence is good in and of itself, whether practiced or not, and should therefore be desirable. Nonviolence, as a virtue, aligns with Kantian ethics by upholding a good will and maintaining moral integrity, irrespective of the potential positive consequences of violent actions. With this in mind, one could argue, much like Hornborg is doing, that even if violent acts of protests were to yield positive outcomes, it would still lack moral justification because the goodwill behind it is compromised. The concept of 'duty' is also introduced as a term for the good will when it stands in opposition to inclinations, emphasizing that actions gain moral worth when driven by duty instead of inclination. Norman offers a charitable interpretation of Kant here, suggesting that an action driven by inclination lacks moral worth unless it is also motivated by a sense of duty (*ibid.*, 73). It is our duty to obtain from violence,

not because it leads to bad outcomes, but because it aligns with the foundational principles of morality and ethical conduct, emphasizing the Kantian notion that actions acquire true moral worth when propelled by duty rather than mere inclination.

So to summarize what we have derived from this analysis, categorizing the identified premises of the arguments supporting the case of nonviolence also leaves us with ‘consequentialist maximization’ and ‘mitigation of harm’ as the confounding premises of denouncing violence, where values like justice, effectiveness, utility and well-being. The logical deduction is that nonviolence in climate activism seems ethically preferable from a consequentialist perspective. However, the same conclusion was drawn in favor of violence in the argument in previous sections, which causes me to assume that though Malm and Hornborg seem to differ in their arguments, they, in fact, hold similar ethical perspectives and values.

What ultimately separates them is that Hornborg eventually turns to a deontological reasoning when opposing Malm. Sure, these two could find common ground in establishing a timeframe for assessing the consequences of a violent act, sparking a spirited debate on its merits and drawbacks. But what I find more significant is Hornborg's transition from a consequentialist perspective to a deontological one. After this analysis, I have come to the conclusion that understanding the nuances in their interpretations has been essential to unraveling the underlying philosophical distinctions that drive their differing perspectives. What assumptions are made regarding normative concepts like harm and justice? It is difficult enough to derive fruitful conclusions in a debate on an issue from a consequentialist perspective when the opponents does not explicitly or implicitly agree on a timeframe for assessment. But engaging in a debate on normative ethics becomes especially challenging when trying to connect with someone holding an entirely different theoretical foundation. While this isn't necessarily a general problem in philosophical discussions (it is precisely how moral philosophical discussions have unfolded since ancient times) our case involves two contemporary thinkers prominent in their field where the issue is highly affected by time as a factor. The assumptions they hold about normative concepts like violence, harm, and justice send ripples through the entire debate. For those unaware of the distinct moral philosophical perspectives of Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg it might seem valuable to take sides. However, in reality, it may be unfavorable for the climate movement as a whole to engage in a power struggle over their personal moral compasses. Instead, I urge those who seek to

engage in climate debates to simply be aware of the normative values underpinning these kinds of arguments when contemplating moral issues at hand. Although reflecting and taking a moral stance is never in vain, the emphasis should remain on finding common ground and fostering collaboration to address urgent environmental challenges rather than being sidetracked by individual moral disagreements and discussions in ivory towers. The distinctive nature of the climate issue creates a scenario where ethical considerations from past discussions and social movements may not be applicable. In such cases, reason and clarity is more important than ever. I am not trying to make a case in favor of one or the other, I have not taken it upon myself to defend or denounce violence in climate activism. Instead, I have, by delving into these assumptions, shed light on the divergent arguments, values and ethical frameworks and, consequently, found a possible basis for the contrasting conclusions of Malm and Hornborg. This essay's most compelling argument revolves around the revelation that sharing a similar stance on crucial values does not automatically lead to consensus in an argument. By shedding light on the nuanced aspects of their ethical considerations, the essay underscores the complexity of aligning values in the realm of urgent global issues. Malm and Hornborg's arrival at divergent conclusions and perspectives on the role of violence in climate activism highlights the importance of understanding and navigating these nuanced ethical landscapes to foster a more comprehensive dialogue within the broader discourse on climate action.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt in my mind that Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg are prominent intellectuals whose insights are valuable to this field, but I also cannot deny their shortcomings in this debate. Malm endorses physical assaults on environmentally damaging structures while Hornborg philosophizes about humanities shortcomings and just distribution of guilt and responsibility. But how can the climate movement succeed? I have attributed myself the right to criticize these two, although I recognize that analyzing the respective arguments of justification through urgency and the principle of nonviolence perhaps landed us nowhere near an answer to such a question.

Malm emphasizes the urgency of addressing climate change and argues that nonviolent methods may not prompt the necessary rapid societal transformations. While supporting the

use of force, he also acknowledged the ethical dilemma and potential harm caused by violence. However, violence in the form of property destruction is only viewed as a powerful symbolic act to draw attention to the severity of the climate crisis. There are historical examples where disruptive actions led to societal change, and it is possible to suggest that similar methods could be effective in the climate context. By not causing direct harm to any living person, the act of blowing up pipelines and using violence on infrastructure important to carbon heavy industries causes more good than bad consequences, making it morally defensible in the eyes of consequentialists.

On the other side of this debate, Hornborg warns against the unintended consequences of violent actions, particularly the risk of triggering authoritarian responses or exacerbating social inequalities. Hornborg suggests that the climate crisis is deeply intertwined with complex socio-economic systems, and violence oversimplifies the problem, hindering the search for comprehensive solutions. Hornborg may oppose Malm by arguing that nonviolent, systemic changes are more likely to lead to sustainable and just outcomes over the long term. But the heaviest difference is in the nature of his arguments in comparison to Malm. Hornborg ultimately advocates for ethical responsibility in navigating the complexities of society and the environment, emphasizing the importance of nonviolent approaches by urging Malm and those who agree with him to refrain from such methods with the deontological logic of nonviolence as a categorical imperative.

By clarifying values, comparing definitions, testing compatibility, and revealing conflicts, this investigation explored the exchange of views between Malm and Hornborg. The nuances that were found are crucial in unraveling the intersection between ethics and climate issues, emphasizing the ongoing need for reflection in the face of contemporary crises and exploring how ethical frameworks adapt or fall short in response to changing circumstances. While it might appear that divergent opinions stem from prioritizing different values, I would argue, based on the findings in this analysis, that such a correlation is not always evident. Despite apparent differences, Malm and Hornborg share some underlying values. The crux of their divergence lies not necessarily in the values underpinning their respective arguments, but in their theoretical foundations and how these are expressed. Delving deeper into potential value hierarchies within the climate debate could also be helpful for a comprehensive understanding of questions of this nature. An exploration of such kind might unravel more nuanced prioritization of values, unveil further potential conflicts and areas where ethical

frameworks and concepts need refinement. In the intricate case of climate activism, such research could most definitely contribute to the development of more effective strategies and policies that resonate with a broader spectrum of ethical perspectives. But, most importantly, it would provide guiding efforts to address divergent ethical viewpoints and facilitate more informed decision-making for a collective response to the global environmental crisis. But, most importantly, it would offer guidance in observing, understanding and addressing varying ethical perspectives and contribute to fostering a collective response to the global environmental crisis where we explore how something should be and how this can be justified; similar to the purpose of this essay.

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