

Ethics Getting Involved in the Climate Crisis

On Stephen Gardiner's Ethics of the Climate Transitions

Otto Veli Johannes Snellman

University of Helsinki

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Abstract:

Why those that are most responsible and capable in the climate crisis are not doing nearly enough? Stephen Gardiner argues that in addition to diagnosing the failures of ethical agency amid the crisis, climate ethicists should face them head-on. He outlines "ethics of the climate transitions" or, shortly, transition ethics. It aims to help in building ethical motivation for the institutional overhaul needed to limit the heating to 1,5°C.

The work addresses transition ethics and the ambitious ideas on ethical action-guidance put forward in it. It is argued that transition ethics should be understood as concessive theory in David Estlund's sense. It weighs moral correctness of principles and motivations with their practicability. In concessive transition ethics, the empirically informed diagnosis of the climate crisis and the advocated ethical prescriptions should be in constant interaction. Transition ethics should remain flexible about degrees and areas of concession. It should also stay properly modest: its prescriptions are not the ultimate expression of climate justice, but something to work on in the uncertain and complex circumstances of the climate crisis.

Transition ethics is put to test by noting that climate ethicists are not insulated from the various problems of ethical agency that the climate crisis breeds. Appropriating Gardiner's ideas and political realism, it is argued that transition ethicists are threatened by theoretical vices. These are rooted in the indeterminate approach of weighing practicability and moral constraints. By reviewing recent contributions in climate change communication and social and moral psychology, it is showed that Gardiner's "moral corruption" diagnosis and "defensive ethics" may be subject to the theoretical vice of wishful thinking. Yet if transition ethicists guard against wishful thinking too eagerly, another theoretical vice called strategic inconsiderateness awaits them. The more specific root of the twin vices is located in the role of prescriptions in transition ethics. They may either overtly condition the diagnosis or be reduced to mere strategic communication.

To get some clarity on the proper role of ethical prescriptions, the issue is further discussed in a context crucial for transition ethics, i.e., political legitimacy. It is argued that Gardiner's argument called the global test is a condition of political legitimacy amid the climate crisis. The test shows why the prevailing but failing institutions should be rejected. Yet it is argued that the normative grounds of the global test and its status as a concessive and action-guiding prescription are ambiguous. Therefore, two alternative interpretations of the test are outlined, one based on political realism and other on Allen Buchanan's theory of political legitimacy. It is concluded that the Buchanian approach is more apt as a benchmark of transitional prescriptions. It informs flexibility of concession and shows some limits to modesty and political realist suspicion. The conclusion is that relatively non-concessive ethical prescriptions may be an antidote against the theoretical vices amid the fog of confusion of the climate crisis. Ethical integrity may also help transition ethicists to be relevant for the global climate movement ushering the ethical climate transitions.

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1 Transition Ethics in the Perfect Moral Storm of Climate Change

“[I]n the climate change debate the true moral questions do not concern what kind of actions should be taken, but why those who should act to avert calamity have not done so. In this light, arguments about the ethics of climate change, including assertions about their complexity and uncertainty, may actually contribute to the fog of confusion that plays to the desire to do nothing.” (Hamilton, 2014, p. 341).

The crisis of climate change finally became a truly major political issue in the last years of 2010’s. This has involved changes in the dynamics of climate politics in the Global North. The vitalized global climate movement, spearheaded for instance by Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, has brought the ethical aspects of the calamity more forcefully into the public eye. At the same time, the scientific understanding on the crisis has become all the time more extensive and accurate. Indeed, being in some sense “pro-climate” – however vaguely and variedly – has arguably become the mainstream stance of politicians and businesses, at least in some societies of the North. Yet the systemic institutional changes needed to keep the destruction at tolerable levels have become an increasingly polarized political issue also in Europe (Forchtner, 2019).

As Clive Hamilton argued already in 2014, there is not that much unclarity on the general direction of action for the next few decades to come. Even most of the actors of the climate movement seem to accept the Paris Agreement 1,5 °C target as an end state. (Of course, activists remain critical of the projected emission reduction and removal trajectories, like heavy reliance on negative emission technologies (Dyke et al., 2021) and bioenergy (Simon, 2021).) Still, Hamilton’s “true moral questions” cited above remain valid, unfortunately. Despite all plans, green PR, beautiful speeches, exemplary actions and fall in economic activity due to COVID-19 pandemic, the gap between the projected emissions based on the Nationally Determined Contributions in the Paris Agreement and the emission reduction trajectory needed to reach the 1,5 °C target has continued to grow (United in Science 2020; United Nations Climate Change, 2021)¹. Greta Thunberg summarized the ethically treacherous situation in her speech at COP 25:

¹ At the time of writing, COP26 in Glasgow was in progress. There was hope that “[p]ledges made at the summit so far could start to bend the global emissions curve downwards” (Morgan, 2021).

“I still believe the biggest danger is not inaction. The real danger is when politicians and CEOs make it look like real action is happening, when in fact, almost nothing is being done, apart from clever accounting and creative PR” (Reuters, 2019).

Could climate ethics² help us in the treacherous situation? When Hamilton (2014, p. 335) suspects that it only increases confusion, he is specifically pointing towards Stephen Gardiner’s “definitive” work in climate ethics and especially the 2011 monograph *A Perfect Moral Storm*. I grant that Hamilton is right that the key ethical questions of the climate crisis consider the ethical character and agency of the people failing to deal with the crisis. Yet in this thesis, I claim that he is too quick to dismiss Gardiner’s work. It deserves renewed attention in the changed political atmosphere – though its central object of making the climate crisis more widely recognized as an ethical problem has been fulfilled, at least partly.

Gardiner’s work shares Hamilton’s contention that the epistemological problems about what to do are not ethically central in the climate crisis. Instead, Gardiner’s (2011a, p. 4) approach is influenced heavily by *virtue ethics*. It focuses on the questions of character and agency and “seeks to identify the characteristic ‘temptations’ present in certain situations, positions, or ways of life, where these are understood as vulnerabilities to behaving badly to which many are likely to be susceptible” (Ibid.). Gardiner combines this with specific, ambitious and demanding ideas about the *action-guiding* role of climate ethics in tackling the challenges of climate action. In addition to diagnosing ethical problems of the climate crisis, he calls for “ethics of the transition” (Ibid., p. 400). In this work I use a more readable synonym, *transition ethics*. Transition ethics faces the obstacles of agency head-on and tries to help in building *ethical motivation* to get people going with the institutional overhaul needed for sufficient emission cuts and adaptation.

This thesis is about transition ethics. My research question is two-fold. Firstly, I ask how the approach or practice of transition ethics should be understood. Gardiner’s explicit discussion on the methodology and theoretical underpinnings of transition ethics is limited, so there is need for explication, interpretation and elaboration of the

² “Climate ethics” includes for Gardiner both moral and political philosophy (Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016, p. 8). I use “(climate) ethics” in the same broad sense. Gardiner does not draw distinction between moral/political *theory* and *philosophy*, and neither do I.

account. Sections 1.1 and 1.2 of this chapter outline my take on transition ethics. I set transition ethics in the context of Gardiner’s “perfect moral storm” diagnosis on the ethical condition and challenge of the climate crisis. Also, I clarify the relations of transition ethics and Rawlsian non-ideal theory, an approach that has recently inspired some climate ethicists to think about what to do in the circumstances of widespread ethical failure. Yet most importantly, I interpret transition ethics as an example of what David Estlund has called *concessive ethical theory*.

Secondly, I reflect the problem of ethical character back to transition ethics itself. I do this by appropriating Gardiner’s own ideas and the critique of moral and political theory by the so-called *political realists* of the early 21st century Anglo-American political thought. I ask what kind of intellectual threats or *theoretical vices* transition ethicists face due to the ambitions of the approach, and how they might cope with these threats. Section 1.3 presents the idea of theoretical vice, introduces political realist critique and explains how the two other main chapters of the thesis address the research question.

Why is transition ethics worthy of discussion? Gardiner’s diagnosis on the ethical problem of climate change has received a lot of attention – at least given the still relatively marginal status of philosophy of the climate crisis in academia. Yet transition ethics has hardly been discussed after *A Perfect Moral Storm*, by others or even by Gardiner himself. I think that transition ethics deserves more attention for two reasons. Firstly, as already mentioned, it embodies the important focus on ethical character and agency that is highly relevant in the new treacherous conditions of climate politics, where ethical signaling and lip service about climate action have proliferated while the sufficient transitions are still not in sight.

Secondly, transition ethics relates itself to the acuteness of the climate crisis in a way that deserves attention. If we are to avoid a catastrophe, we really need to overhaul our institutions and infrastructure in the next few decades. Yet what sets Gardiner apart from some other notable analytic climate ethicists is that the acuteness of the crisis and the years of failure do not lead him to doubt the power of ethical motivation (see Broome, 2017; Caney, 2016) or call for a more complete overhaul of our ethical concepts (see Jamieson, 2013).

For Gardiner, the rush gives an extra reason to be vigilant about vulnerabilities of ethical characters. But the rush also pushes to think over the usual roles and boundaries

of philosophical ethics. Discussing transition ethics is a discussion about if and how ethics might contribute to getting people, governments and businesses to do what they should to avoid further disruption of the life-support systems of human civilization and the biosphere, which are the preconditions of academic ethics itself. So, given the acute ambitions of action-guidance and practical involvement, discussing transition ethics implies that the boundaries between moral and political philosophy or normative philosophy and empirical research cannot be respected. Indeed, this thesis relies not only on sources in both moral and political theory, but also on contributions in climate change communication and social and moral psychology of climate change.

In sum, the thesis strives to answer Hamilton's suspicion on climate ethics: how might it really help to disperse "the fog of confusion" on the climate crisis rather than making it thicker? Even better, how might climate ethics be helpful rather than simply irrelevant? Given the limitations of theoretical discussion on action-guidance noted in Sub-Section 1.2.1, my discussion remains necessarily counterfactual. I cannot say if transition ethics will ever be widely practiced. Neither can I rule out the possibility that it is too ambitious on the role and powers of philosophical ethics to start with. I still conclude in general terms that *if* climate ethicists will strive for transition ethics, they should, on the one hand, remain (self-)reflective on the intellectual vices the ambitious practice makes them vulnerable to. Yet, on the other hand, they should also note that suspicion has its limits in action-guidance. To increase the chance of being useful for political agents who are pushing for climate transitions, transition ethicists need to maintain *ethical integrity*. That is, they need to take clear, and to some extent intellectually bold, ethical stands.

1.1 Perfect moral storm and transition ethics

In the perfect moral storm account of the climate crisis, Gardiner's (2011a, p. 3) aim is to clarify "what the problem is" with the climate crisis. The clarificatory task can be understood in at least two different ways. Firstly, the account articulates "what is at stake, morally speaking" (Ibid., pp. 66–68) in the climate crisis. Secondly, it explains how unfortunate interaction of certain institutional, psychological, epistemic and other

factors make ethical climate action difficult, especially for those most responsible and capable to act, i.e., the rich of the Global North³ (Ibid., p. 421–426).

Shortly put, the argument is that the climate crisis sets “a genuinely *global* and crucially *intergenerational* collective action problem⁴ in a setting where our understanding of the issues is *theoretically underdeveloped* and open to *moral corruption*” (Gardiner, 2011c, p. 128, original emphasis). Gardiner calls the global, the intergenerational and the theoretical dimensions of the crisis as “storms”. In his more recent writings, he adds the ecological storm to the list, namely, the fact that the climate crisis poses a *biosphere wide threat* (Gardiner & Weisbach 2016, pp. 15–16; cf. p. 44 n. 31). The point is that though all the four storms pose difficult problems when considered separately, together they interact in unfortunate ways and amplify each other into a “perfect moral storm” (Gardiner, 2011a, pp. 22–23).

Similar general characteristics account for the viciousness of the global (or spatial), the intergenerational (or temporal) and the ecological (or interspecies or biospheric) dimension (Ibid., pp. 24–29, 32–38; Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016, pp. 32–35). Firstly, causes and effects of climate change are dispersed spatially, temporally and across species. Greenhouse gasses emitted in one time and place contribute to a global phenomenon that effects agents, beings and habitats in other places and times too. Secondly, there is no single spatially or temporally united agent that either solely causes or could solve the problem. Also, though the problem is to be solved by humans, their agency is conditioned by complex, uncertain and powerful non-human processes. Thirdly, the current economic, social and political institutions are inadequate in dealing with the storms, not to mention tackling them all together, as is demanded. Fourthly, all the dimensions are marked by gross inequality in terms of vulnerability and power.⁵ The agents that have most power and responsibility to mitigate the crisis, people living now in the richer nations of the North, are the least vulnerable to the effects of climate

³ According to my understanding, Gardiner’s climate ethics is in general targeted to the elites of the North. I assume that his use of the first-person plurals (“we”, “us” etc.), which this thesis occasionally adopts, refers to the elites of the North. Despite the possible rhetoric advantages, it is notable that this use of language risks contributing to the marginalization of the Global South in the climate discussions.

⁴ Gardiner (2011a, ch. 5; see Ibid., pp. 50–63) relies heavily on game theory in describing the predicament. I will not explain his game theoretical models, but it is good to note that they are behind concepts such as “collective action problem” and “structure of motivations/interests” (see below).

⁵ Gardiner (2011a, p. 31) mostly presents this characteristic as if it would be an “exacerbating factor” of the global storm only. Yet he applies it also to the temporal and biospheric dimensions (Ibid., pp. 46, 302). Unequal vulnerabilities and power are also central in moral corruption, the main diagnostic result of the perfect moral storm (see below).

heating. The current poor, future generations and non-humans are not only least responsible and most vulnerable, but importantly they also have little power to hold the current richer nations accountable. Especially non-humans and future generations have no voice, literally speaking.

In addition, all the storms have unique “exacerbating factors” (Gardiner, 2011a, pp. 29–32, 39–41; Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016, pp. 35–37). For example, the global storm is made worse by the fact that the climate crisis is driven by fundamental practices and institutions of the modern civilization, that is, fossil-fuel-powered capitalism. The theoretical storm stands apart from the other dimensions: it is formed by the fact that our theoretical understanding of the other storms, especially in normative terms, is marked by uncertainty, unclarity, and even ineptitude.

The richer parts of the currently living generation have strong interests in upholding the business as usual (e.g., maintaining and growing high levels of consumption). Accordingly, each of the storms (not to mention their convergence) “provides or encourages strong temptations to current decision-makers to take benefits for themselves while passing on costs to others – in other countries, in the future, and to members of other species – in ethically indefensible ways” (Gardiner 2014, p. 300). In other words, the ethical stakes of the climate crisis are that the current rich “take advantage of” (or exploit) the poor, the future generations and non-humans. Yet importantly, the problem of ethical agency in the climate crisis is not as straightforward as self-aware bad behavior or that people would simply not understand the stakes. The perfect moral storm is a fertile breeding ground for moral corruption, that is, in general terms, different mechanisms of rationalization and biased reasoning that people utilize to exonerate themselves from the otherwise recognized ethical demands (Ibid., pp. 45–46, 301–302). The major diagnostic result on the ethical character and agency of people of the North may be “of greater practical importance than any one of [the storms]” (Ibid., p. 23) and “the biggest obstacle to effective action” (Ibid., p. 10). Due to the centrality of moral corruption in Gardiner’s transition ethics, I call it separately as *the moral corruption diagnosis*.

An all-too-common example of the mechanisms of moral corruption is “denialism” or unreasonable doubt about the scientific basis of climate change or feasibility of mitigation policies (Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016, pp. 40–41; cf. Chapter 2). Another is

selective attention on the contemporary global and geopolitical aspects of the crisis, which might problematize action and portray the crisis only as a problem of avoiding self-harm for the current generation. This “essentially *assumes away*” the injustices that the current generation inflicts on future people and non-humans (Ibid., original emphasis). The corrupt mechanisms include pandering, hypocrisy, complacency, delusion and distraction (Ibid.). Gardiner (2011a, pp. 301–302) emphasizes how moral corruption spreads and is reproduced in the public climate debates, where it targets “our ways of talking and thinking” on the ethical aspects of the climate crisis. People have temptation to succumb to corrupting arguments that are weak individually considered, but whose quantity and repetition eventually gets under the skin (Ibid., 337–338). Gardiner (Ibid., pp. 314–336) gives multiple examples of familiar corrupting arguments, like passing-on responsibility (“what about China, the US and India?”).

Why Gardiner calls this condition moral *corruption*? He argues that the “core case of corruption”, i.e., “illegitimate taking advantage of a superior power for the sake of personal gain” is illuminating in the perfect storm (Ibid., p. 304). This shows the connection between moral corruption and the unequal vulnerabilities and powers in the storms. Since accountability is weak, the current rich are “judges” (Gardiner, 2017b, p. 463) and, to add, rationalizing “lawyers” (McQueen, 2020, p. 6) in their own cases. Also, though many of the mechanisms work through familiar human psychological tendencies, in *moral* corruption they are used in relation to the recognized ethical concerns of the climate crisis. Here Gardiner (2014, p. 303) emphasizes especially the strong “intergenerational concern” that “most of us” have.⁶ Moral corruption subverts this ethical (self-)understanding and reframes the nature of the problem (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 305). People may eventually perceive their convenient (in)action as warranted or even praiseworthy – moral corruption serves the function of making them feel better of themselves in the face of failure

Moral corruption is not only a matter of the individual level of moral psychology. It is largely (or even mostly) driven by inadequacy of institutions creating structures of spatially and temporally narrow and anthropocentric motivations that displace the ethical concerns (Ibid., pp. 58–59). The institutional structures condition individuals,

⁶ Gardiner notes only briefly here that there is a strong ethical concern “perhaps also for the global poor and the rest of nature”. In many ways, for him the intergenerational dimension is the “crucial” aspect of the climate problem (see above). I will not discuss this prioritization issue in this work, though it is an important topic in transition ethics.

businesses and states, which manifests in, for instance, mentalities of consumption and limited political horizons of national electoral cycles. Accordingly, and given that fragmentation of agency and dispersion of causes and effects cannot be readily changed, the main way to temper the perfect storm is institutional reform or, perhaps better, overhaul (Ibid., pp. 10, 61; Gardiner, 2011b, pp. 51–52; Gardiner, 2017a). Institutional overhaul is also a means to increase accountability of the most responsible and strengthen the voice of the silent victims (see Gardiner, 2014). The overhaul can be understood as a set of “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” (IPCC, 2018) needed to reach the Paris agreement 1,5 °C target. In this work I generally call the institutional overhaul as *climate transitions*. The term does not only designate the infrastructural and technical reforms needed to cut emissions in, say, energy, traffic and manufacture. It is also about the institutions that more fundamentally drive the predicament by supporting and reproducing the dominant, narrow, short, unsustainable and anthropocentric motivations.

Although the perfect moral storm account is mostly diagnostic, its motive is that climate ethics could also help in moving towards solutions immediately. With this goal in mind, Gardiner outlines the philosophical project of “ethics of the [climate] transition” at the end of *A Perfect Moral Storm* (ch. 12). Given the theoretical storm, we are lacking a guiding “ideal” theory that would “work out the best way in which to deal with some domain or issue in an otherwise neutral (or even moderately encouraging) practical setting” (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 399). Specifically, we are lacking the best theory of intergenerational, global and biospheric justice. Gardiner thinks that philosophers should continue to pursue the ideal theory (Ibid., pp. 12, 434–435). Nevertheless, they should also (and perhaps primarily) focus on transition ethics that helps us move forward “ethically starting from existing, and sometimes deeply constrained or ethically compromised, social realities” (Ibid., p. 400).

Gardiner distinguishes different tasks of transition ethics (Ibid.). These are finding “overlaps” between existing ethical theories, setting “intermediate normative criteria, parameters, benchmarks”, and identifying ethical constraints in a sense of “intuitively clear cases of failure”.

Gardiner (2011a) defends eight substantive propositions of this kind. Briefly, these are: 1) international climate policy already rests on ethical concerns (ethical responsibility

and criticism of the committed states are warranted), 2) “scientific uncertainty does not justify inaction”, 3) precaution is sound in the climate crisis, 4) past emissions are ethically relevant, 5) the rich states of the North, “and especially the wealthy within those nations”, ought to bear most of the burdens from climate transitions, adaptation, compensation, recognition, and reconciliation, 6) though the general direction of action is clear and justified, more specific emission reduction trajectories within the framework need to be also justified, 7) the current affluent have a right not “to completely ruin their own lives in order to comply with climate justice”, but this right is “sharply limited”, 8) individuals bear some responsibility of the failures of the institutions that have worked on the basis of their delegated responsibility and power (see 3.2). (Gardiner, 2011a, pp. 401–434).

Gardiner also separately calls for the “practice” (Ibid., p. 403) or “strategy” (Ibid., p. xiii) of *defensive ethics* against moral corruption. Sometimes he portrays the matter as if the eight propositions are the substance of transition ethics and defensive ethics refers to how they should be protected from moral corruption in the public discourse, e.g., by calling out bad and corrupting arguments against the propositions (Ibid., pp. 302, 337). Yet I think it is better to understand the matter so that the whole approach of transition ethics needs to be defensive. Namely, the moral corruption diagnosis is to be considered also when articulating transitional propositions. Indeed, Gardiner argues that the ethical constraints articulated in the transitional propositions are as such important weapons against moral corruption (Ibid., p. 309) – and many of the eight propositions seem to be rather direct answers to specific threats of moral corruption.

There is more to defensive transition ethics than formulating and defending the propositions. Ethicists should raise awareness on the phenomenon of moral corruption in general and on the more specific temptations people face in the climate crisis (Ibid., p. 308–309, 337). Gardiner uses climate ethicist Henry Shue’s dictum as a kind of motto in *A Perfect Moral Storm*: “sometimes sunlight is the best antiseptic” (Ibid., p. 13). Gardiner is hesitant about directly blaming anyone for moral corruption (Ibid., 308). This is because its modes are “rich and varied” and it can be hard to say exactly who is morally corrupt and who is “merely mistaken” (Ibid.). Also, as discussed above, moral corruption is largely structurally driven. In short, “we” are all susceptible to moral corruption in the climate crisis, so finger-pointing can be self-defeating. Yet, sometimes Gardiner seems to be more willing to blame people for “*willful* self-deception and moral

corruption when the lives of future generations, the world's poor, and even the basic fabric of life on the planet is at stake” (Ibid., p. 11, my emphasis; see Gardiner, 2011b; 2012; 2017b; see also 2.2).

So, given that the moral corruption diagnosis is very central in transition ethics, and that accordingly the whole approach should be defensive, I understand transition ethics in wider terms than Gardiner sometimes seemingly does himself. That is, I argue that there are two main interconnected and interactive (see 1.2.2 below) moments in transition ethics; diagnostic and prescriptive. This interpretation allows to see most of Gardiner’s climate ethical project, especially in *A Perfect Moral Storm*, as transition ethics – thinking diagnostically about “what the problem is” is elemental in moving forward in the constrained and compromised circumstances. Ethically oriented but empirically sensitive diagnosis is the basis of more prescriptive ethical materials that purport to guide climate transitions. The prescriptive moment includes the eight propositions listed above, but also other varied ethical principles and arguments articulated in transition ethics (e.g., the global test discussed in Chapter 3). Yet the proper relation of the two components is far from clear and simple amid the perfect storm. Indeed, problems related to the relation, in one way or another, are a central consideration in both main chapters of this thesis.

In addition, transition ethics should be seen as a practice with a distinct and ambitious idea on how ethical theory should try to guide climate action. The next section discusses this idea and how it is theoretically embedded in transition ethics.

1.2 Action-guidance and concessive theory

Though admittedly one of the strengths of Gardiner’s work is that it shows that ethics can have various roles in the climate crisis, this thesis focuses primarily on one such function that is at the core of transition ethics. It is the idea that transition ethics should be action-guiding in the sense that it helps to construct and support ethical motivation for climate transitions acutely needed in the next few decades. In broader terms, transition ethics should help creating *ethical agency for climate transitions*. Sub-section 1.2.1 elaborates this ambitious idea of action-guidance in terms of different interpretations given to the slippery notion of *feasibility* and Gardiner’s distinction of

justifying and motivating reasons. The sub-section also notes important limits of theoretical discussion on action-guidance.

The second task of the section is taken up in Sub-section 1.2.2. It is to elaborate the theoretical underpinnings of transition ethics to see how the specific idea of action-guidance is embedded in the approach. Gardiner (2011a, pp. 399–400, 434–436) associates transition ethics with the so-called “non-ideal theory”, done in the circumstances of the theoretical storm where the ideal theory is out of reach, yet where action-guidance on how to get the ethical climate transitions done is immediately needed. Yet, Gardiner’s explicit methodological discussion on transition ethics is thin. Therefore, I elaborate, extend and interpret his ideas. I argue that transition ethics shares the central normative elements and the approach of weighing these elements with John Rawls’ original framework of ideal/non-ideal theory (or, at least, with influential interpretations of the Rawlsian framework). However, some other features of the Rawlsian distinction – namely, its hierarchical nature and strict prioritization of the ideal – do not go well with transition ethics.

Therefore, I further elaborate transition ethics in terms of some contributions that can be loosely associated with “the methodological turn” in the early 21st century political thought, springing from “frustration with political philosophy’s perceived lack of influence on real-world politics” (Valentini, 2011, p. 654; see also Erman & Möller, 2015b). I show that David Estlund’s ideas on *concessive ethical theory* are especially helpful in this respect. I also cite some theorists of the ideal/non-ideal distinction that have departed from the Rawlsian framework (especially Valentini (2011) and Hamlin & Stemplowska (2012)), including climate ethicists that have proceeded with the “non-ideal” approach on Gardiner’s initiative (especially Kowarsch & Edenhofer (2017); for broader perspectives on non-ideal climate ethics see the other essays in Heyward & Roser (2017)). Along the way, I point out how different features of transition ethics set the stage for the two main chapters of the thesis.

1.2.1 Action-guidance in transition ethics

To understand the specific idea of action-guidance put forward in transition ethics and the limits of discussion in the thesis, two general things need to be noted about the vague notion. Firstly, action-guidance can be thought as straightforward prescription of

certain action(s) or as less specific “(re-)orientation” (Ulaş, 2020, pp. 5–7, 21). The latter means illuminating and highlighting certain features of political systems or the ethical condition of people so that they become more informed about the prospects of change and their potential agency in it (Ibid.; McKean, 2016, pp. 1–2). Gardiner’s transition ethics contains both action-guiding and -orienting elements. In the main, the perfect moral storm account and the moral corruption diagnosis purport to orient people to see their ethically vulnerable and corrupt position in the climate crisis and how it helps to reproduce the business as usual. Yet transition ethics also prescribes distinct transition-guiding principles (e.g., the eight propositions mentioned above).

Secondly, Ulaş (2020, p. 4, original emphasis) argues that what is usually meant by “action-guidance” in theoretical debates is not really about guiding anyone’s action (i.e., in the sense that the target agents would be really *acting upon* reasons and ideas articulated by a theory) but “the successful *offering* of guidance for political action”. Yet even “offering” is in a sense contrafactual consideration because political philosophy suffers from “the problem of publicity” (Ibid.). That is, its recommendations “extremely rarely” get any proper attention in the public sphere. I follow Ulaş (Ibid., original emphasis) in noting that the theoretical discussion on action-guidance is, properly put, about “*potential* to be action-guiding, were the publicity problem solved”. In this thesis I bracket the publicity problem, but the reader should keep in mind the contrafactual nature of the discussion. Therefore, my assessment of transition ethics in terms of action-guidance is at most speculative; I admit that “[w]hat will stick, in a world filled with cases of failed outcomes, is rarely predictable” (Philp, 2012, p. 637). Yet, instead of conceding impossibility of all theoretical assessment before practical “testing” (to which there may or may not be sufficient skills, motivation and resources), I claim that something can be initially said for and against different interpretations of transition ethics. Most importantly, Chapters 2 and 3 show that different interpretations can varyingly expose transition ethicists to intellectual threats embedded in the very practice itself (see 1.3 below).

Now, to the idea of action-guidance put forward in transition ethics. According to Ulaş (2020, pp. 5–7), action-guiding theory must not only be theoretically consistent and consider relevant issues for the practical problem at hand, but also “feasible”. One way to distinguish differing accounts of action-guidance is in terms of different interpretations given to the feasibility condition. Some suggest that it is enough to meet

the condition if a theory does not prescribe anything impossible, given our knowledge on the limits of humanity and its conditions of existence – no matter how highly idealized or unlikely to be ever met in practice its prescriptions are (see Estlund, 2014, pp. 121, 133). It is shown below that this interpretation is put forward in the Rawlsian ideal/non-ideal theory. Another interpretation of the feasibility condition is that an action-guiding theory must not only set possible ideal goals (in the ultimate sense), but also get involved with the questions of their implementation (Ulaş, 2020, p. 5). For instance, Allen Buchanan's (2003, p. 61) demand that an action-guiding ("ideal") theory must be "accessible" can be understood in these terms. That is, there should be "a practicable route from where we are now to at least a reasonable approximation of the state of affairs [satisfying the principles]" (Ibid.).

Gardiner would perhaps grant that climate ethics should operate *also* at these levels of feasibility. Transition ethics involving agency-building takes a further step. Gardiner's (2011b, pp. 41–42) distinction of justifying and motivating reasons helps to understand this. Despite the theoretical storm, the problem in the climate crisis is not that sufficient justifying ethical reasons for climate action are unclear or lacking. People do recognize the central ethical concerns of the crisis. Also, the *general* trajectory of action is well-established scientifically, politically and even ethically: the Paris agreement 1,5 °C target.⁷ The main problem is that the justifying reasons do not translate into reasons that actually motivate people, businesses and governments for climate transitions. The explanation for the motivation problem is the perfect moral storm and moral corruption.⁸

Transition ethics should help in "engaging and then making operative the motivations" to overhaul the institutions that drive the climate crisis (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 10). So, "feasible" action-guidance in transition ethics demands something more than offering relevant, consistent and accessible justifying reasons. Transition ethics should provide and advocate ideas, arguments and principles that could engage and make motivationally operative the ethical reasons latently recognized by the targeted agents. In other words, it should help building ethical agency motivated for climate transitions,

⁷ Gardiner's (2011a, p. 428) decade-old description of the general trajectory is vaguer. I assume that nowadays there is a strong "overlapping consensus" on the 1,5 °C target. Yet, of course, there remains significant issues about the more specific trajectories inside the 1,5 °C framework.

⁸ See (Gardiner, 2011b, 2013; Jamieson, 2013; Peeters et al., 2019) on Gardiner's metaethical assumptions on moral motivation, i.e., his sympathies to motivational externalism.

using “building blocks” already inherent in “modern life” and ethical understandings (see *Ibid.*, p. 400). The wish to cross the boundary of justifying and motivating reasons is behind the vision that transition ethics should be a communicative and political practice, and not just theoretical undertaking isolated to academia (though in reality it has remained more like the latter). Though it might be possible to establish theoretically that some justifying ethical reasons could also motivate, only political advocacy and action, if anything, can unleash the motivating potential.

It could be argued that the goal of ethical agency-building is naïvely ambitious and over-confident about the powers of academic philosophy to start with. Ulaş (2020, pp. 9–10; see Geuss, 2008, p. 36) is right to point out that all political achievements, not to mention major institutional overhauls, happen for various ethical and non-ethical motives, balances of powers and other factors. This surely applies for climate transitions as well. Ulaş (2020, pp. 9–10) adds that even if it were a real consideration (i.e., were the publicity problem solved), it could be extremely hard to vindicate after the fact how motivationally effectual some purportedly action-guiding ethics were in specific changes. Indeed, prohibiting the influence of all other motives (like self-interest) would be unduly demanding, and Gardiner (see e.g. 2017, pp. 28–29) does not do that. Nevertheless, he maintains that “our best chance of addressing the storm seems to rest with ethical motivation” (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 442) and, more generally, that “invocation of morality is a useful motivational tool” in climate politics (*Ibid.*, p. 308). Indeed, at least initially, some empirical studies support the motivating power of morality in the climate case (Bain & Bongiorno, 2020; Markowitz, 2012; Markowitz & Shariff, 2012).

Also, it is charitable to think that Gardiner is not expecting climate ethicists to build ethically motivated agency alone. They are expected to *help* in the task, e.g., by trying to set and support it as an agenda for more powerful political change agents like the global climate movement. Though it may be impossible to say how much transition ethics can help in the end, my point in the thesis is that its goal and agenda as such evoke methodological issues worth discussing.

1.2.2 Transition ethics as concessive theory

Transition ethics seems to have a goal that crosses the boundary of justifying and motivating reasons in its ambitious ideas of action-guidance, which is atypical for

philosophical ethics. It is no wonder, then, that Gardiner has rather distinct ideas on the approach of transition ethics. In this sub-section I elaborate the theoretical underpinnings of the approach. I do this, firstly, by articulating the commonalities and differences transition ethics has with the Rawlsian ideal and non-ideal theory. Secondly, I interpret transition ethics as Estlund's concessive theory. For this purpose, I also cite some contributions in ideal/non-ideal theory debate that depart from the Rawlsian understanding. I also distinguish three key features of concessive transition ethics, namely, flexibility, interactivity and modesty.

As per usual, one needs to start from Rawls⁹. Gardiner (see especially 2011a, p. 438 n. 1) explicitly refers to Rawls' ideas on ideal and non-ideal theory when discussing transition ethics. Gardiner retains some important ideas already formulated by Rawls, though I argue that being too faithful to the Rawlsian framework does not suit transition ethics. The distinction of ideal and non-ideal theory was Rawls' solution to "the venerable problem" of political philosophy, that of "characterizing the relationship between philosophical theory and political practice" (Simmons, 2010, p. 6).

For Rawls (2001, p. 10; cited in Simmons, 2010, p. 7), ideal theory "probes the limits of practicable political possibility" given the boundaries of human nature and material conditions on Earth – as was pointed out above, Rawlsian ideal theory operates with the ultimate understanding of feasibility. More precisely, it states the moral principles¹⁰ that should determine the basic institutional framework of an ideally just society (Simmons, 2010, p. 7). There is a strong, hierarchical "division of labor" (Sleat, 2016, p. 28) in the Rawlsian distinction, where non-ideal theory is "secondary and dependent upon [ideal theory]" (Simmons, 2010, p. 10). If ideal theorizing draws "a blueprint" (McKean, 2016, p. 3) of the just basic institutions, non-ideal theory tries to find the best way from our reality of injustice to the end-state of justice (Simmons, 2010, pp. 7, 12).

A central idea is that non-ideal theorists, when considering alternative routes to the ideal, should "weigh" considerations of moral permissibility, political possibility and effectiveness (Ibid., p. 18). Consequently, non-ideal theory needs to balance moral considerations with results of empirical sciences that inform about effectiveness,

⁹ I rely here on secondary sources, especially A. John Simmons' (2010) notable explanatory essay on Rawls' ideal/non-ideal distinction. My point is not to defend any interpretation on Rawls' work but to elaborate the key Rawlsian ideas Gardiner is and is not using in transition ethics.

¹⁰ The principles are defined with the help of idealized assumptions of "favorable circumstances" and "strict compliance". See (Simmons, 2010, pp. 7–9) on the nature and function of the assumptions.

political possibility and uncertainties on a relevant local level (Ibid., p. 19). Simmons argues that Rawls is silent on how to balance the three elements (Ibid., p. 18). Yet, it might be that “anything less sloppy” should not be expected in non-ideal theory (Ibid., p. 20), at least on the abstract level of methodological discussion. Rather, non-ideal theory might be seen as an approach where the normative elements or the “moral vectors” need to be weighed against each other in an interdisciplinary and flexibly localized manner (Ibid.).

I argue that the moral vectors and the weighing approach are elemental to transition ethics. Indeed, the task of agency-building can be related to all the three vectors. To be effective, the agency-building ethical materials should be such that they could help motivate the given, specific audience to overhaul their institutions. The contextual issues of political possibility need to be considered to understand what kind of transitional agencies might be accessible. The advocated agencies also need to be built upon ethical (or at least morally permissible) motivations. Gardiner maintains that transition ethicists should try, at least as far as possible, to get people acting *upon* the right ethical concerns.

Despite the shared features, there is an important mismatch between transition ethics and Rawlsian non-ideal theory. Juxtaposing two central points on the accounts makes this clear. On the one hand, transition ethics starts from the fact that we do not know the ideal theory of global, intergenerational and biospheric climate justice. On the other hand, in the Rawlsian framework non-ideal theory does not have a point or purpose if the ideal goal is unavailable (Ibid., pp. 24, 33–34; Moellendorf, 2016, p. 107–110). In other words, were transition ethics understood as Rawlsian non-ideal theory, it would be pointless and without purpose. Indeed, Rawls thought that the priority for political philosophers is ideal theorizing (Simmons, 2010, pp. 33–34; cf. Mills, 2004). Gardiner is not so strict about the matter. To repeat, he argues that philosophers should continue with ideal theorizing¹¹. But this is not enough in the acute circumstances of the climate crisis, where time is running out. There is no guarantee that philosophers are finished with the ideal blueprint any time soon (if ever). And even if they would, the ideal theory probably is not sufficient to temper the perfect moral storm, which is only partly an epistemological problem. The malady of moral corruption (driven to a large extent by

¹¹ This means ideal theorizing on justice as an *approach*. Gardiner (2011c) argues that Rawls’ first-order ideal theory of justice is severely complacent about global environmental crises.

the inadequate institutions) is not healed with ideal accounts of justice, though they might help. Therefore, despite the theoretical storm, transition ethics ought to be started right now.

One could claim that the mismatch implies that transition ethics is just a confused application of the Rawlsian distinction. However, I argue that transition ethics contains a genuine, though underspecified, theoretical departure from the Rawlsian ideal/non-ideal theory framework (or the simple reading of the framework presented here, cf. Simmons, 2010, p. 36). Estlund's (2014) ideas on concessive (and non-concessive)¹² approaches to political and ethical theory are useful in further specification and elaboration of transition ethics. The difference between concessive and non-concessive theory is that concessive theory factors in the likelihood of its prescriptions to be achieved in practice (Ibid., p. 121). *Non-concessive* theory is not to prescribe anything unfeasible *qua* impossible (in the same ultimate sense as in the Rawlsian ideal theory), but its principles might have slight or zero probability to be ever implemented in practice (Ibid., p. 118). The difference comes down to different theoretical interests. Non-concessive theory is interested in formulating the best, true or sound normative theory – something that people ought to and are able to do, but still may not ever do. In contrast, concessive theory is about “what we should do, in practice” given (among other things) our best knowledge about what people and institutions are likely to do (Ibid., p. 123). So, concessive theory “concedes” *some* sound moral principles in the face of restrictions of reality. Everything cannot be conceded, at least if normative theory wishes to remain critical of the status quo (Ibid., p. 115). Though it is consistent to prescribe people to do exactly what they are already doing or likely to do, even normative theories sensitive to practicability usually state that there is something (and usually a lot) to improve in the business as usual.

I argue that transition ethics is better described as concessive theory than Rawlsian non-ideal theory. Yet it is good to emphasize that the two frameworks have much in common. Namely, I take it that political possibility and effectiveness of prescriptions emphasized in Rawlsian non-ideal theory are practical issues to be considered also in concessive theory alongside likelihood. To this list should be added the consideration of

¹² Estlund (2014) uses a few synonyms for concessive/non-concessive theory like “hopeful/hopeless aspirational theory”. For the sake of clarity, I use only “concessive/non-concessive”. Despite using value-laden terms like “concessive” or “hopeless”, Estlund is not arguing for priority of either concessive or non-concessive theory.

accessibility from Buchanan's political theory, namely, that there should be a practicable route from the current situation to the prescribed goal. In this work I term these four interconnected considerations collectively as *practicability*. In concessive transition ethics, ethical correctness and permissibility of prescriptions is weighed with their practicability.

Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between the Rawlsian approach and concessive theory, which is the reason why the latter is a better model to transition ethics. In contrast to the Rawlsian ideal and non-ideal theory, concessive and non-concessive theory are not hierarchically related. The former is not one-sidedly dependent on the latter. Instead, "concessive theory exists *alongside* non-concessive theory"; they are "*parallel*" to each other (Ibid., p. 124, my emphasis). Instead of there being *the* one grand non-concessive theory as the guiding goal and the ultimate expression of justice¹³, the idea is that theories contain both concessive and non-concessive levels, and that theories can concede some things but not others (Ibid., p. 132).

Taking an example in terms of transition ethics (see Ibid. for Estlund's own example), assume that a sound theory of global, intergenerational and biospheric justice demands that the current nation state system ought to be radically overhauled. Yet, suppose also that this is extremely unlikely achieved in the next few decades or even in the longer run. Concessive transition ethics would ask what is to be done, when the sound ethical demand of overhauling the nation state system is too unlikely met. This concession creates a new theoretical level, so to speak, on which transition ethics can formulate further principles about what the states should do. And, if even these principles are too unlikely to be met in our circumstances, further concession could be made, and so forth.

Therefore, there is *flexibility* to concessive transition ethics. This means that the appropriate level of ethical concession and likelihood – or, as Gardiner puts it, the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory, – is "a matter of degree" (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 436; see also Hamlin & Stemplowska, 2012; Valentini, 2012). The point about flexibility is that the degree of concession is not pre-determined and can vary

¹³ The fully non-concessive theory akin to the Rawlsian ideal theory (cf. Estlund, 2014, pp. 127–129) remains as a viable theoretical project, though Estlund (2014, pp. 123, 132–133) gives up the assumption that it necessarily has any practical value. This is relatable to what Gardiner thinks about ideal theory: if it existed, it could be helpful, yet it hardly solves the problem of the climate crisis.

from case-to-case, and that theories can operate on multiple levels of concession. Gardiner (2013, p. 130) signals this when he talks about “more ‘ideal theory’”, which should not be possible, would he strictly follow the Rawlsian framework. Gardiner suggests that a theory (or a part of it) can be more or less ideal (or non-concessive).

Importantly, despite flexibility, degree of concession is not arbitrary but should be selected in terms of the goals of the theoretical effort in question (see Valentini, 2012, p. 660). Therefore, though concessive theory can entail rather non-concessive prescriptions, the decisions to include them are made in a goal-oriented mindset. Non-concessive principles are never included *solely* based on their ethical truth, but only after weighing them against considerations of practicability and goals of the project in question. In transition ethics, the goal is to help in ethical agency-building for climate transitions. So, transition ethicists should be flexible but (self-)reflective about their ethical (non-)concessions: are they justifiable in terms of the goal of the project? Chapter 2 argues that this inconclusive weighing of the concessive and non-concessive normative elements is tricky and intellectually risky.

Awareness of the goal of the theoretical effort and flexible tuning of degrees and areas of concession in its terms demands another feature from concessive transition ethics. It does not come up explicitly in Estlund’s discussion but is emphasized by Gardiner himself. Though I separate analytically the diagnostic and the prescriptive tasks of transition ethics, they should be understood as closely *interactive* or even co-constitutive. Gardiner (2011a, pp. 53, 72 n. 6) maintains he does “practical ethics” instead of “applied ethics” (as in, e.g., the Rawlsian “blueprint model”). While applied ethics suggest “‘invoke and apply’” (Ibid., p. 308), that is, “a model whereby theory is made independently of practice and then simply imposed on cases” (Ibid., p. 72 n. 6; see Williams, 2005, p. 1; Geuss, 2008, pp. 8–9), practical ethics stays constantly mindful of the real-world issues. “Deep analysis” on precise nature of wrongs of the world and how they are reproduced by social and political systems (see Gardiner, 2011a, p. 243) should affect the formulation of transitional principles – studying the climate crisis in practical ethics is “challenging the assumptions and boundaries of current orthodoxy” (Gardiner, 2017, p. 431 n. 3).

Chapter 2 shows how Gardiner’s defensive transition ethics is build-upon the moral corruption diagnosis, which is an idealized account about the presumably prevalent

climate ethical agency in the North. One should not confuse (Rawlsian) ideal theory and idealization. The latter is not always about ideal institutional principles but a necessary tool of all theoretical understanding which can have various functions (Mills, 2004; O'Neill, 2018, pp. 55–70). The function of idealizations in the moral corruption diagnosis is, of course, diagnostic. It is an explanation of what is the main problem with the climate crisis. It is from the start openly ethically loaded, yet importantly, it shows that the ethical motivations are indispensable in any proper solution to the climate crisis. Therefore, the moral corruption diagnosis anticipates and justifies solutions to the crisis centered on the prospects of ethically motivated agency for climate transitions. These are, then, formulated and advocated in the prescriptive parts of transition ethics, in the form of, e.g., transitional propositions and defensive ethics.

The point about interactivity is not only that diagnosis conditions prescription, but also vice versa. Kowarsch & Edenhofer (2017, pp. 304–305) help us to think about “a systematic feedback loop” between diagnosis and prescription in the spirit of Deweyan pragmatism. On the one hand, “prima facie ethical hypotheses – – can help conceive new policy objectives, which can in turn help to identify and evaluate ethically relevant” practical implications of measures. On the other hand, when “hypotheses” or initial principles are tested against the reality in concrete applications, their real effects in a context partly determine their further development. Of course, any extensive “testing” of transitional principles or tactics is, to my knowledge, still out of sight, so the idea of systematic feedback loop is itself hypothetical. But I argue that the model captures something important about the interactive nature of concessive transition ethics. It articulates principles, which guide the diagnostic eye reviewing and interpreting empirical research. Diagnoses, then, will affect the future development of the principles, as they can challenge the current philosophical orthodoxy. However, this process is not self-evident and easy. Chapter 2 reveals the risk that the moral corruption diagnosis is unduly conditioned by Gardiner’s ethical ideas. Yet Chapter 3 argues that though transitional principles need to remain open and malleable, there is still a reason to maintain a level of ethical non-concession. To initially understand the latter point, few things need to be said about uncertainty and *modesty* in transition ethics.

Transition ethics shares the concern of concessive theory in what should be done, in practice, here and now, despite the ideal theory of justice being inaccessible. In the case of transition ethics, the ultimate ideal (or the most non-concessive theory) is

inaccessible because it is not known. I take it that the theoretical storm is about both moral and empirical disagreement or uncertainty about feasibility (i.e., what is the limit of practicable political possibility). The lack of the ultimate ideal is not necessarily that consequential, since even if it would be available, it may not be helpful with the concern of what should be done. Also, it is important to repeat that despite the ultimate ideal is unknown, the ethically right direction of action for the next few decades is rather clear. However, due to (bounded) uncertainty and disagreement, transition ethics is marked by intellectual modesty (Gardiner, 2013, pp. 125–126, 130). This aspect does not come up directly in Estlund’s discussion on concessive theory, but I think it may fit the framework as an extension – i.e., how the theoretical storm should affect concessive theorizing.

Gardiner elaborates modesty as “methodological minimalism” where “the aim is, as far as practicable, to avoid prejudging contentious questions *within ethical theory*” (Ibid., pp. 123–124, original emphasis). Theoretical storm is a reason for minimalism; it is “premature” to prejudge contentious questions amid uncertainty. It should be added that prejudging might be irresponsible, since it may demand predicting which unjust features of the world cannot be removed (Buchanan, 2003, p. 67) – consider the weight of saying to some people that injustice they face is necessary. A second reason for minimalism is that “an evolving methodological modesty can be an important strategy” in transition ethics (Gardiner, 2013, p. 125). This is a strategy for formulation of transitional principles in terms of overlapping theoretical consensus on ethical climate action (Ibid.). Gardiner’s eight transitional propositions are examples of how far he thought it was possible to get with the strategy at the beginning of 2010’s. Yet, importantly, methodological modesty is evolving. There is no claim that the propositions are the best take on intergenerational, global and biospheric justice, or that the justification of their level of concession is set in stone. It is likely that overlapping consensus *within* ethical theory accounts for far stronger propositions now. As Chapter 3 discusses (see 3.3.2 & 3.4), modesty also implies that transition ethics should stay constantly open to alternative articulations of ethical reasons for climate transitions burgeoning not only in professional theoretical thinking but also in political struggles for climate justice.

Modesty does not imply ethical neutrality *without* ethical theory (Gardiner, 2013, p. 124) or total concession. In other words, transition ethics involves criticism of the

business as usual. It makes (to a degree) non-concessive ethical prescriptions that are seemingly unlikely achieved – for instance, it has been claimed that there is only a 1% (5%) chance that the world will reach the 1,5 °C (2 °C) target (Raftery et al., 2017). Though I argue in Chapter 2 that transition ethics is about weighing concession and non-concession, sometimes the non-concessive ethical reasons for certain transitional policies can be such that one should advocate them despite low likelihood. It is typical in (or even elemental of) politics that sometimes unlikely things happen, especially when it comes to major progressive social changes (Estlund, 2014, pp. 133; see also *Ibid.*, n. 21).

Some advancements may be genuinely unlikely. But it is important to note also that prognoses of social sciences on likelihood of specific changes are often uncertain to a degree. As is concluded in Chapter 2, it might be tempting in transition ethics to overestimate what can be established with the current empirical results. Practical uncertainty may give extra validation for relatively non-concessive and seemingly unlikely ethical prescriptions – it may be hard to say what really is politically possible, and non-concessive normative theory may itself contribute to making things more accessible (*Ibid.*; Gardiner, 2011a, p. 436). Indeed, despite the (bounded) methodological modesty, Chapter 3 will conclude that all-in-all the non-concessive ethical backbone is something to hold-on in transition ethics.

It is appropriate to sum up the key concepts and distinctions introduced thus far: I understand transition ethics as *concessive theory*, where the ethical correctness of prescriptions (their non-concessive justification) is weighed against considerations of *practicability*. Practicability entails political possibility, effectiveness, likelihood of implementation and accessibility in our conditions. I distinguished two main moments of transition ethics, *diagnostic* and *prescriptive*. I stipulated that these moments are *interactive*: diagnosis should inform and condition prescription, and prescription should guide diagnosis. I also argued that there are no *apriori* rules to the concessive weighing. Instead, transition ethics should remain *flexible* about different degrees of concession. Different parts of transition ethics can be more or less concessive. What guides the concessive weighing is the ultimate goal of transition ethics, that is, building ethical agencies for climate transitions. Concessive transition ethics should also heed the theoretical storm and remain *modest* within ethical theory and keep in mind the circumstantial nature of its prescriptions.

1.3 Tools of critique: theoretical vices and political realist suspicion

Now, after the initial elaboration and interpretation of transition ethics as a concessive theory, I present the tools of critique that will be used to assess the approach in the coming chapters. First of them is Gardiner's idea of theoretical vices. Second is a related but more general suspicion about the limits of ethical theory proclaimed in political realism, a loose "movement" in recent Anglo-American political philosophy. Besides introducing the critical tools, I also outline the two main chapters of the thesis and explain how the tools will be used in them.

The shortcomings of moral and political theories indicated by the notion of theoretical vice are not about internal coherence. In the middle of the climate crisis (as indeed always, see Mills, 2005), theoretical thinking does not happen "in a neutral evaluative setting" (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 231). Formulation and choice of theories might itself be "corrupt"; theories might "address our concerns, and leave aside those that we would rather not see addressed" (Ibid., p. 232). Accordingly, the perfect moral storm makes mainstream political and moral theories – like "economic utilitarianism, libertarianism, Rawlsian liberalism and cultural nationalism" (Ibid., p. 230) – susceptible to vices including complacency, evasiveness and opaqueness about the climate crisis (Ibid., pp. 230–244; Gardiner, 2011c). Theories can be charged of such vices if, for instance, they offer just an "easy initial diagnosis" (e.g., "climate change is unjust to the global poor") without deep analysis on the predicament or serious suggestions for solutions (Gardiner, 2011a, pp. 243–244).

I will not address Gardiner's arguments on the theoretical vices of the mainstream theories or institutions they help to uphold. Instead, I turn the critical gaze towards transition ethics itself. I resist the self-acquittal that a transition ethicist may grant to herself while exposing moral corruption and vices of others. Instead, I call for continuous self-reflection on the possible theoretical vices of transition ethics itself. Transition ethics is not bothered by the same theoretical vices that threaten the mainstream theories. In Chapter 2, I argue that a theoretical vice that especially threatens Gardiner's central ideas in transition ethics, the moral corruption diagnosis and defensive ethics, is *wishful thinking*. That is, Gardiner's non-concessive convictions about the right reasons for climate action may unduly affect how the problem of the

climate crisis is framed and diagnosed as a problem of moral corruption. Chapter 2 reveals this problem in the interaction of prescription and diagnosis by assessing current empirical research in climate change communication and social and moral psychology of climate change that are relevant for the moral corruption diagnosis.

Chapter 2 also presents a complementary theoretical vice to wishful thinking threatening transition ethicists. *Strategic inconsiderateness* may arise if the focus is too much on whatever presumably “works” as a solution to the climate problem. The vice is about overestimation of empirical knowledge on the limits of human motivation and political possibility – it too is rooted in the interaction of empirical diagnosis and normative prescription. I am not suspecting Gardiner of strategic inconsiderateness. Indeed, he is adamantly arguing against it (see e.g. Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016). The point of Chapter 2 is to present wishful thinking and strategic inconsiderateness as the twin theoretical vices against which transition ethicists should try to find protection. The chapter argues that the threat of the twin vices is perennial in transition ethics since it is an unavoidable byproduct of the indeterminate weighing of concession and non-concession. Also, the more specific locus of the twin vices is recognized: the role of the prescriptive transitional principles, widely understood as all the ethical “materials” that should help to build the ethical agency for climate transitions.

Why, one could ask, I see the concept of theoretical vice as an appropriate tool of critique for a work discussing the approach of transition ethics and action-guidance amid the climate crisis? Given its explicit connection to virtue ethics (see Gardiner, 2011a, p. 4; 2013, pp. 129–130), the concept may open-up broader and, if you will, more “human-faced” considerations than more formal methodological considerations. A premise of this work is that the climate crisis is, ethically speaking, very much a problem of character and agency. The point of theoretical vices is that ethical theory is not exempt from the human vulnerabilities in the perfect moral storm – and I add that neither are transition ethicists. They too need to constantly ask the self-reflective question of “[w]ho we are’, morally speaking” (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 4), while trying to orient people towards ethical climate agency.

To complement the critique of the theoretical vices of transition ethics, I also cite some (highly selected) ideas of theorists associated with political realism, for instance, Bernard Williams and John Horton. Political realism can be associated with the same

“methodological turn” in the early 21st century political thought as ideal/non-ideal theory and concessive theory (Valentini, 2011, p. 654).¹⁴ They are occupied with relations of political/ethical theory and practice and argue for less dichotomous relations of empirical sciences and normative theory. Yet, their ideas are usually relatively radical and skeptical towards moral theory (Hall & Sleat, 2017). Skepticism is visible in Alison McQueen’s (2020, pp. 1–2) list of typical political realist tenets:

(a) affirm the autonomy (or, more minimally, the distinctiveness) and contextual specificity of politics; (b) take disagreement, conflict, and power to be ineradicable and constitutive features of politics; (c) reject as ‘utopian’, ‘idealist’, or ‘moralist’ those approaches, practices, and evaluations which seem to deny these facts; and (d) prioritise the requirements of political order and stability over the demands of justice (or, more minimally, reject the absolute priority of justice over other political values).

There may be fundamental metaethical differences between Gardiner and political realists in their respective levels of trust in the possibility of moral truths (see Hall & Sleat, 2017). I am not trying to settle any fundamental issues here. Yet I think that selected bits of political realism can complement the critique of transition ethics precisely because of its suspiciousness about the power of philosophy to influence practice and its critique of simplistic ideas of ethical motivation in politics. As the virtue ethical critique of theoretical vices, political realists are prone to “unmask” vulnerabilities of ethical theories/theorists, though they usually put the matter in terms of ideology critique (McQueen, 2020; Prinz & Rossi, 2017). Indeed, in Chapter 2 the idea of wishful thinking is taken up from political realists and interpreted as a theoretical vice.

Chapter 2 introduces the intellectual threats in the interaction of diagnostic and prescriptive moments of transition ethics. It singles out the role of transitional principles as the point especially vulnerable to theoretical vices. Chapter 3 aims to find ways to think about transitional principles that would help diminish the threat of theoretical vices. It discusses a specific transitional principle formulated by Gardiner, the global

¹⁴ Other prolific theorists associated with political realism include Raymond Geuss, Chantal Mouffe, and Mark Philp (Galston, 2010; Rossi & Sleat, 2014). Notable commentators include Matt Sleat, Enzo Rossi, Alison McQueen, Edward Hall and Robert Jubb. Political realists draw on varied intellectual sources such as “the realist tradition” including Thucydides, Machiavelli, Weber, Hume, Hobbes, Schmitt and Nietzsche (Rossi & Sleat, 2014; Galston, 2010), classical IR realism of, e.g., Hans Morgenthau and E.H. Carr (McQueen, 2020; cf. Rossi & Sleat, 2014, pp. 696–697) and Critical Theory (Williams, 2002, pp. 225–232; Sagar, 2018).

test. I argue that the global test is central in transition ethics since it is an argument that shows why people should reject the major social and political institutions that drive the crisis. Thus, it is a necessary step towards the institutional overhaul that transition ethics tries to motivate. In other words, I argue that the global test introduces the important consideration of *political legitimacy* to transition ethics that Gardiner fails to discuss explicitly. Yet he thinks that it is the acceptance of the subjects of their failing institutions that keeps up the status quo. In Gardiner's theory of change, climate transitions can only happen if political illegitimacy of the major institutions, brought by their failure to deal with the climate crisis, is realized by their subjects.

I argue in Chapter 3 that when the global test is defined as a condition of political legitimacy, it is revealed as ambiguous in terms of its normative grounds and suspect to wishful thinking. This makes it difficult to assess it as a concessive transitional principle. To find an example of a transitional principle that would help avoid the theoretical vices, I formulate two alternative interpretations of the global test. The interpretations emphasize different aspects of Gardiner's account and depart from it to opposite directions. The first interpretation is based on political realists' ideas on political legitimacy. It founds the global test on the (minimally) universal but indeterminate existential security threat of the climate catastrophe that makes the failing institutions illegitimate. The importance of contextual reasons of the subject of power and the affinity with empirical concepts of political legitimacy make the political realist approach rather concessive. The second interpretation is inspired by Allen Buchanan's ideas of "justice-based" political legitimacy. It bases the global test on a clear, non-concessive ethical principle of equal protection of the most basic interests of all and human rights.

Though both interpretations can initially disambiguate Gardiner's global test, I think that the Buchanian approach is a better benchmark to concessive transition ethics on how to think about transitional principles. If the political realist approach is more broadly applied in transition ethics occupied with agency-building, it is threatened by specific theoretical vices. Political realists may become "conservative by default": their suspicion of almost all non-concessive ethics may lead to an inability to ethically defend clear alternatives to the status quo that are needed to guide an institutional overhaul. Also, assuming that their ideas are meant to directly orient politics, political realists seem to be subject to wishful thinking. Political realism asks for tricky "double-

mindedness” about the nature of politics and morality that may be unfeasible and distant for the political actors fighting for ethical climate transitions.

The approach of the Buchanian global test shows that *if* ambitious ethical agency-building is a viable goal, then non-concessive ethical integrity, that is, clear and defensible ethical stands as transitional principles should be a part of the repertoire. Ethical integrity mitigates the threats of strategic inconsiderateness and being conservative by default. The account is also somewhat protected from wishful thinking, since despite its non-concessive core, the Buchanian transitional principles are formulated also with practicability in mind. Most importantly, the principles are chosen partly because they are salient weapons in actual political struggles. Thinking about transition ethics in the Buchanian way could make its contributions more useful for the global climate movement, arguably the main political force pushing for *ethical* climate transitions.

As to the lessons for concessive theory and transitional principles, my conclusion is that the Buchanian account draws limits to modesty in transition ethics. In the circumstances of uncertainty and acute rush, transition ethics may not afford that much intellectual “sensitivity”. The account also informs about goal-oriented flexibility in concessive transition ethics. Sometimes apparently impracticable non-concessive transitional principles may be the best way to get closer to the goal of ethical agency-building. Though I argue that political realism is unfitting to the ambitions of transition ethics, it remains as an important limit case. It shows that overt concession can be self-defeating in the business of action-guidance. I also conclude that political realism provides transition ethicists some important reminders about the compromises of concessive theory and action-guidance. These are necessity of audience- and context-sensitivity for motivation building, inevitability of political partisanship and lasting presence of the theoretical storm.

2 The Twin Theoretical Vices in Transition Ethics: Balancing between Wishful Thinking and Strategic Inconsiderateness

The chapter revolves around the interaction of prescriptive and diagnostic moments of transition ethics in general, and Gardiner's defensive transition ethics in particular. The focus is especially on the diagnosis justifying and directing defensive ethics, the account of moral corruption. The diagnosis has it that the main obstacle of ethical climate transitions is moral corruption bred by the perfect moral storm, i.e., unfortunate interaction of institutional narrowmindedness, temporal, spatial and epistemic structure of the climate crisis and human psychological propensities (see Chapter 1). The moral corruption diagnosis defines the problem that transition ethics seeks to alleviate with principles, arguments, communication tactics *et cetera* that aim to build ethical agency for climate transitions. Based on the diagnosis, Gardiner argues that transition ethics should be to a significant extent "defensive" in a sense that it is about defending against and protecting from moral corruption. Defensive transition ethics should urge "a modest redirection of the public debate" (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 399) on the climate crisis, presumably so that there is less leverage for people to get morally corrupt in the first place, and that the already morally corrupt will face their own corruption more often (reveal to heal).

Perhaps curiously for a thesis in philosophy, my critique of the moral corruption diagnosis and the derived defensive approach involves centrally an assessment of their guiding empirical assumptions. I rely especially on recent contributions in the multidisciplinary field of climate change communication and social/moral psychology of climate change. I note that the guiding assumptions of the diagnosis are made on a specific level of idealization. It is the (most?) general climate ethical agency and moral psychological condition arguably widely shared in the Global North. For the sake of the argument, my critique operates on the same level, though the concluding section suggests it may be too general. The point is to show that even on that level, Gardiner's guiding assumptions are too weakly empirically substantiated to justify the elevated status of moral corruption in transition ethics.

An obvious limitation of the chapter is that some other empirical results not discussed here could back defensive ethics. My assessments are admittedly brief, sketchy and initial. The point is not to rule this option out, or to say the final word about empirical matters. The point is to explicate some key threats to character and agency climate ethicists face when committed to the concessive approach of transition ethics. I am not claiming that any explicit methodological choice is prompting Gardiner to unduly privilege moral corruption. Rather, Gardiner's quickness in granting moral corruption suggests a theoretical vice of wishful thinking. He might be guilty of unintentional selective appraisal and neglect of relevant empirical results for the purpose of making his acute ethical project look more plausible. The chapter demonstrates how does the threat of wishful thinking comes about in transition ethics.

Wishful thinking is not discussed directly by Gardiner, but by some political realists. I argue that alertness about it is something to learn from political realists, not only for Gardiner but for transition ethicists in general. The concluding section 2.4 elaborates an unavoidable normative tension that makes transition ethics vulnerable to wishful thinking, i.e., the tension between concession and non-concession. I also conclude that pursuing flexibility and reflectivity on (non-)concessions of transition ethics might help with wishful thinking. Yet it exposes to another theoretical vice related to the proper relations of the diagnostic and prescriptive moments of transition ethics. I call it as *strategic inconsiderateness*. The main point of the chapter is that transition ethicists are exposed to the twin theoretical vices of wishful thinking and strategic inconsiderateness. In both vices, the role of ethical prescriptions put forward in transition ethics is awry. Chapter 3 explores some ways to alleviate these problems.

Section 2.1 following the introduction is preparatory: it elaborates the theoretical vice of wishful thinking and initially associates moral corruption with the similar moral psychological account of *moral disengagement*. After that, I assess two ways in which Gardiner can be suspected of wishful thinking. In Section 2.2, which relies mostly on insights from climate change communication, I take the moral corruption diagnosis as given for a while and discuss Gardiner's defensive arguments and communication tactics. The question is whether the psychologically "heavy" tactics (e.g., arguments approaching blaming) used in defensive ethics might really motivate (or "heal") the morally corrupt, or are they instead dictated by Gardiner's ideas on what the corrupt deserve, ethically speaking. So, here the threat of wishful thinking is not located on the

diagnostic level as such, but in the translation process from diagnosis to purportedly action-guiding transitional arguments. The section concludes that the translation is an uncertain process, and that the lasting threat of wishful thinking in it calls for routine assessment of constantly evolving empirical research. Yet I also argue that the threat is not that immediately severe for Gardiner.

Section 2.3 discusses a threat of wishful thinking located on the diagnostic level proper, namely, whether Gardiner grants too quickly that the morally corrupt are the prominent type of moral agents in the North, and, thus, justified as the privileged target of transition ethics. I suspect wishful thinking because the morally corrupt are almost “too convenient” for Gardiner’s ethical concerns: they do recognize “deep down” the ethical stakes of the climate catastrophe but are distanced from them thanks to psychological maneuvers and institutional pressures. In other words, they do not *really* disagree on the crucial ethical matters, though it may superficially seem so. I argue that here the threat of wishful thinking is acute; perhaps it would be enough just to point out that Gardiner (see 2013, pp. 107–108, 2017a, p. 29) is hardly citing any proper empirical evidence to back prominence of moral corruption. However, I am to do more, since Peeters et al. (2019) have recently argued that moral and social psychological research on moral disengagement has corroborated Gardiner’s account of moral corruption. I argue that even though the research is relevant for transition ethics, its results are not enough to substantiate prominence of moral corruption.

2.1 Wishful thinking and moral corruption

In this section I do two preparatory tasks. Firstly, I elaborate the theoretical vice of wishful thinking. Secondly, I argue that the account of moral disengagement can be taken as an empirical basis of moral corruption.

Starting from wishful thinking: the critique wielded in this chapter is based on Edward Hall’s (2013, pp. 225–227) (Bernard Williams -inspired) worry that even purportedly “realist” moral and social psychological assumptions of theories can get easily “moralized”. A theorist can “smuggle”, likely unintentionally though, normative commitments into her theory by assuming certain psychological makeup that serves well her overall ethical story. If this happens, construction of a theory is guided by wishful thinking rather than well-evidenced beliefs about the matters of fact. Hall &

Sleat (2017, p. 290) argue that avoidance of wishful thinking is difficult and awkwardly personal “because it may problematize some of our most cherished political ideas or undermine the likelihood that they might be realized any time soon”. In case of the climate catastrophe, where the stakes are extraordinarily high, this vulnerability might be pronounced. Indeed, at least initially, Hall’s (2013, p. 228) warning seems alarming for transition ethicists: “[O]ur beliefs about achievability should be grounded in a resolutely historical and sociological understanding and not in the pious hope that people may change for the better if only the right institutional changes take place.” So, I suspect Gardiner of selective appraisal of the empirical results that support his overall ethical project, and insufficient notice of their uncertainties and limitations.

Wishful thinking can be readily understood as an example how interaction of the prescriptive and diagnostic moments of transition ethics may go awry. Additionally, I understand it as a theoretical vice as defined in Chapter 1. Yet it should be emphasized that the driver of wishful thinking in Gardiner’s case is not moral corruption as in the case of the mainstream theories criticized by him. Instead, what may prompt Gardiner’s wishful thinking is the combination of strong ethical convictions, urgency to solve the climate problem and somewhat limited and uncertain empirical knowledge on the limits of ethical and political agency amid the climate crisis.

Now to the second preparatory task. According to Gardiner the main reason for inertia with climate transitions in the North is *not* fundamental lack of appreciation of the central ethical reasons for climate action. An ethical motivation for climate transitions is accessible but killed by moral corruption. Though intentionally phrased in ethically potent terms, moral corruption can be also understood as an account of social and moral psychology. As such, it is closely resembling the theory of moral disengagement by Albert Bandura. Indeed, Peeters et al. (2019, p. 430) suggest research on moral disengagement (see review Moore, 2015) has empirically corroborated moral corruption. Peeters et al. (2019, p. 430) describe that the goal of the mechanisms of moral disengagement/corruption¹⁵ “is to – consciously or unconsciously – convince oneself and others that one’s reprehensible conduct still falls within moral standards

¹⁵ For the current purposes, the two terms are interchangeable. For the sake of clarity and focus on Gardiner’s account, I opt to use “moral corruption” instead of “moral disengagement”. It is true that “corruption” is more loaded a term, though “disengagement” is also often understood normatively as a problem in the research. It should be kept in mind that no source cited here except Gardiner uses “corruption” rather than “disengagement” or other less frequent alternative terms for the phenomenon.

through changing the perception of one's actions or reconstructing the situation". Bandura (2007) distinguishes eight main mechanisms of moral disengagement, for instance "attribution of blame to victims", "diffusion of responsibility", and "minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences". Most of the eight mechanisms are corresponding to the common corrupt arguments of climate politics catalogued by Gardiner (2011a, ch. 9). For instance, some corrupt arguments are akin to victim blaming, say, claiming that the victims of climate change (especially the current poor, in this case) would be ungrateful for our compensations and would use them badly (Ibid., pp. 328–329).

Why, psychologically speaking, do people distance themselves from their own ethical concerns? Some explicitly relate moral corruption to the classic theory of cognitive dissonance by Leon Festinger (Hindriks, 2015; Stoll-Kleemann & O'Riordan, 2020). According to the theory, people want to get rid of an inconvenient feeling of "dissonance" that is caused by realizing that one's actions and normative beliefs are inconsistent (Stone & Fernandez, 2008). The most straightforward, and perhaps the most common, way to get rid of dissonance is to change one's behavior appropriately (Ibid., pp. 1025–1026). But in certain situations where, for instance, changing the behavior is seen as unfeasible, people might instead reinterpret the situation or their behavior as morally neutral or even approvable (Ibid.).

Bandura (2007) explains the need for moral corruption in terms of an internal system of self-control and -sanction that is central to moral agency. Internalization of moral standards or beliefs "is only half of the story and, in many respects, the less challenging half". This is because the standards are enforced into moral conduct only through "ongoing exercise of evaluative self-sanctions", namely, feelings of self-worth and -condemnation. Appreciating the standards is not enough since people might use multiple maneuvers (i.e., the mechanisms of moral corruption/disengagement) that selectively downplay moral self-sanctions of problematic behavior. It is not that people can do this whenever they want. Rather, circumstantial factors facilitate moral corruption, like presence of strong competing interests and social pressures. Crucially, Bandura agrees with Gardiner that in environmental issues, and maybe especially in the climate crisis, there are bunch of conditions that facilitate corruption. In the vein of the perfect moral storm analysis, Bandura emphasizes the narrow and short spatiotemporal interests embedded in our economic and political systems. (Bandura, 2007, p. 9–10).

2.2 Assessing defensive tactics against moral corruption

Now we can assess the first threat of wishful thinking. I grant for a moment that the moral corruption diagnosis describes accurately the condition of a significant set of people in the North. What I address here is, given moral corruption, the expected effectiveness of the defensive arguments and communication tactics Gardiner suggests should be used to counter corruption. Their purpose is eventually to help to motivate the corrupt for ethical climate transitions, including overhauling the very institutions that induce their corruption. So, here the threat of wishful thinking is not located on the diagnostic level as such, but in the translation process from the diagnosis to the purportedly action-guiding normative materials.

The critique is that some of Gardiner's arguments that approach blaming might be too psychologically burdensome and demanding, at least for most of the corrupt. In other words, Gardiner is arguably not paying enough attention to availability of the psychological and social resources his remedies demand (see also 3.4). For instance, self-reflection is not "weightless" but demands not only specific capacities from individuals and groups, but also appropriate supporting and enabling structures and institutions (see Williams, 2011, pp. 189–191). What makes this a potential case of wishful thinking is the suspicion that psychological severity and demandingness of the arguments is not advised by empirical evidence, but Gardiner's fidelity to the truth of our ethical condition. People must not only be motivated for climate action but also showed what their true ethical character is amid the climate crisis.

I argue that the charges put forward here are somewhat uncertain to start with, and that the threat is not that immediately severe for Gardiner. Since there is no empirical research on the specific tactics of defensive ethics, I assess them indirectly via motivational potential of the emotions and affects they may evoke. This makes my assessment conjectural. Yet the section also shows that translation from diagnosis to transitional materials is an uncertain process, and that the lasting threat of wishful thinking in it calls for routine assessment of constantly evolving empirical research.

The section is divided into two sub-sections. The first describes main affective and emotional elements of defensive ethics, locates the threat of wishful thinking to more exact tactics within it and discusses important limitations of my critique. The second

offers a preliminary assessment of defensive ethics' affective and emotional elements in light of recent contributions in climate change communication.

2.2.1 Affects and emotions in defensive ethics and limits of the critique

Climate ethicists are sometimes blamed for overemphasizing cognitive elements like rational reasoning instead of emotion and affect (Lamb & Lane, 2016, pp. 229–230). Indeed, Gardiner (2011a, p. 308) once describes the morally corrupt as “the discerning”. Unlike some people who simply get, without giving it too much thought, “carried away” by any persuasive moral signaling that politics abound with, the morally corrupt need deliberate rationalizations to stand the inconsistency of their moral standards and behavior (Ibid.). This seems to be at odds with some influential accounts in recent moral psychology that take most people to have rather limited ethical reasoning capacities compared to the central role of gut feelings, emotions, and affect in ethical judgement (Haidt, 2001; Markowitz & Shariff, 2012, pp. 243–244).

I find the accusation too quick in Gardiner's case. He (2011a) explicitly and approvingly discusses and applies moral and social psychological explanations of the climate transition inertia that downplay the role of moral reasoning.¹⁶ For instance, he refers to the popular psychological “dual-processing” models¹⁷. Roughly speaking, the dual models take humans to have two information processing systems: analytic and affective. The analytic system is slow and effortful. It is consciously accessible and dominated by reasoning. The affective system is quick, effortless, and rather automatic. It is dominated by emotion, gut feelings and association. The key point is that in situations where risks and uncertainties are high, like amid the climate crisis, the affective system is often dominant. Gardiner shares the worry that psychologists often express: as an abstract, distant and generally non-personal problem, climate change fails to evoke the affective system vital for motivation. On top of that, people might have a “finite pool of worry” and suffer from a “single-action bias”: They can handle at once only a limited number of issues to worry about, and climate change, which engages the affective system only weakly, gets easily marginalized by other worries. And once people get worried enough to do something, usually only a few insufficient or even

¹⁶ Gardiner cites especially Weber (2006).

¹⁷ See e.g. (Kahneman, 2011) and (Haidt, 2001) for some well-known presentations.

utterly superficial acts will lower the level of worry, and so people fall back to complacent inertia. Therefore, Gardiner thinks that engaging the affective system is necessary when addressing the climate transition inertia. (Gardiner, 2011a, pp. 193–196).

Furthermore, though Gardiner admittedly emphasizes the role of arguments in defensive ethics (what else is a philosopher to do?), there is an affective side to them as well. His most distinctive example of argumentation against moral corruption is propelled by an affective metaphor. He strives to show people that they might be as corrupt and obnoxious as John Dashwood is in Jane Austen’s classic novel *Sense and Sensibility* (which has been, not insignificantly, adapted to a successful Hollywood film in 1995) (Ibid., ch. 9). In general, Gardiner emphasizes the importance of cultural understanding on moral corruption (Ibid., p. 309). Another defensive tactic might appear similarly deceptively rationalistic: debunking the corrupting arguments in the public climate debate. Yet, for Gardiner the rationally persuading power of the arguments is not the main issue (Ibid., pp. 337–338). Instead, debunking is primarily about countering “a barrage” of corrupting arguments, whose sheer repetition and abundance makes them hard to resist, despite their weak quality. The idea gets support from research: simply talking and hearing about climate change in “the good way” is, at least in the US, correlated with higher understanding, risk perception and support for mitigation (Ballew et al., 2019, pp. 8–9, 13).

The “affective logic” of the Dashwoods metaphor exemplifies some general tactics utilized in defensive ethics. A central idea is that self-referential awareness about moral corruption helps because “serious moral agents” do not want to be corrupt (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 301). The results of Bustamante & Chaux (2014), an almost stand-alone field experiment on the topic of mitigating moral corruption, seem to support this. Although the experiment is exploratory and provides at most “hopeful indicators” (perhaps especially for the climate case)¹⁸, it was found out that promoting critical awareness on moral corruption was helpful. This was done in combination with promotion of social norms regulating moral corruption¹⁹ (see also Stoknes, 2014, p. 166).

¹⁸ The month-long workshops had a specific, small group of 116 participants (Chilean 9th grade students). The topic was violence. Processes of moral corruption were not directly studied (see 2.3).

¹⁹ The participants were first encouraged to collectively call out the mechanisms of moral corruption used by others. The authors hypothesized that these practices would eventually promote participants’ self-reflection and capability to resist their own moral corruption.

Gardiner is silent on using social norms against moral corruption. Instead, he seems to explain the motivational potential of self-reflexivity in specific affective terms. He (2011b, p. 59) suggests that “many of us [would] *hate*” (my emphasis) the possibility that humanity is inept to deal with the climate crisis, and that “this might help to motivate us to try to show that we are (as the expression goes) ‘better than that’”. Gardiner develops the idea further especially in (2012) where he suggests that even quite dire, negative, and self-condemning ethical reflections – e.g., “who wants to be the scum of the earth?” – may be motivating (see also Gardiner, 2011a, pp. 70–71; Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016, pp. 71–72).

The central role of promoting negative self-appraisals approaching blaming in defensive ethics evokes the suspicion of wishful thinking. Gardiner might wish to portray his ideas about our ethical condition as truthfully as possible. That is not possible without making people to see how bad off they are (see also 2.4 below). Even though the ideal theory of intergenerational, global and biospheric justice is not available, our current ethical failure and ineptitude is loudly apparent. Given the importance of affect and emotion in general and the putative eagerness to be “better than that” in particular, Gardiner seems to hope that honest ethics and motivating provocation can be united. But the issue is that it is not evident that making people to feel bad about themselves is leading to redemption rather than relapse deeper into self-deception, even when considering only the morally corrupt. In the business of motivation, morality is “a double-edged sword” (Täuber et al., 2015).

The issue is well explained by Stone & Fernandez (2008) in a review of studies using “hypocrisy” (i.e., a specific means to induce cognitive dissonance) to motivate behavioral changes (see also Heald, 2017, p. 10; Pihkala, 2017). On the one hand, people really seem to hate the feeling of dissonance since it threatens their core beliefs of self-integrity, honesty and sincerity (Stone & Fernandez, 2008, pp. 1025–1026). Thus, it is common that clear feelings of dissonance, which Gardiner also tries to evoke, lead to a change of behavior. On the other hand, the results show that people are also quite sensitive to shaming and humiliation, and often react defensively if subject to them (Ibid., pp. 1047–1048). Therefore, Stone & Fernandez conclude that the key to motivating behavioral changes is to allow “people to realize their acts of hypocrisy without making them feel humiliated or shamed in the process”. The question is could defensive ethics achieve this.

Before moving on, an important limitation of my critique should be stated. Chapman et al. (2017; see also Lähde, 2018) have argued that any strong conclusions drawn from climate change communication on associations between particular emotions and motivation (like “guilt is bad for motivation”) are likely too simplistic, if not completely unwarranted. The current empirical research in the field is still too nascent and limited to back such conclusions. Furthermore, even in the extensively studied fields like health communication, meta-analyses show no support for straightforward connections between distinct emotions and motivation. According to Chapman et al., a common shortcoming in climate change communication is that emotions are still often treated as simple and distinct mechanisms, direct causes of singular behavioral responses, which is not correct even for the most basic human emotions. Common limitations also include correlational (instead of experimental) nature of some studies (e.g. Smith & Leiserowitz, 2014) and resorting to participants self-reporting and conceptions on their emotions instead of physiological measurements and more elaborate emotion categories. Consequently, there are still significant knowledge gaps in the field. For example, too little is known about the evolution of affective reactions over time, especially in dynamic political contexts, and about divergent reactions of different audiences in different context to otherwise similar messages.

Therefore, my assessment is doubly conjectural: not only do I assess Gardiner’s tactics indirectly, but also the assessment as such is speculative at most. In the end, perhaps only a practical application would tell how the tactics work in a given context and timeframe and for a given audience. The limitations already ease the suspicion of wishful thinking. However, keeping them in mind, next I preliminarily assess the affective and emotional elements of the self-condemning defensive tactics in light of recent contributions in climate change communication.

2.2.2 Defensive ethics in light of climate change communication

The question is whether Gardiner’s from time to time condemning and self-targeted affective tactics motivate redemption or trigger relapse amongst the morally corrupt. One way to evaluate the tactics is in terms of the threat-efficacy structure (see Witte, 1992), a general affective dynamic of communication found promising by several recent studies in climate change communication (Bilandzic et al., 2017; Feldman & Hart,

2016, 2018; Marlon et al., 2019). The idea is to evoke an emotional combination, sequence or “flow” (Nabi et al., 2018) that produces both appraisals of threat (i.e., the severity of the problem and/or personal vulnerability) and appraisals of efficacy. Researchers have distinguished several types of efficacy (Bostrom et al., 2019; Feldman & Hart, 2016), but for the sake of simplicity I refer only to the two commonly noted types. These are self-efficacy, namely, agent’s perception of her own capacity to do something about the problem, and response efficacy, a perception that the available solutions are effectively mitigating the problem. In the case of climate transitions, self-efficacy could be, say, individual’s beliefs in her capacity to cut her emissions by converting the heating system of her home and to influence the climate politics of her community. An example of response efficacy would be a belief that the available measures – individual, collective, governmental and international – significantly lower emissions and mitigate climate heating.

Though the threat-efficacy model is found promising in general, it is uncertain how exactly it should be applied in communication. Different combinations and sequences of emotion and framing cues have been tested for different audiences with varied results. Consequently, some sets of participants might be closer to the morally corrupt than others even among the few studies cited here. Despite (or rather because of) the complexities and uncertainties, I assess defensive tactics in terms of the threat and efficacy perceptions they *may, hypothetically* evoke. I will take into account emotions and to small extent frames, i.e., selected or unintentional alternative ways of presenting an essentially same piece of information that might change motivational qualities of the message (among other things) (Nabi et al., 2018, pp. 447–448). Frames may vary in terms of orientation (e.g. climate mitigation as a matter of loss vs. gain) and emphasized elements (e.g. mitigation as a question of responsibility vs. security vs. insurance), for instance.

Let us start with the threat component. Negative emotions are usually incited to increase perceived threat of audiences. A motive for this is a hypothesis that a right dose of negative emotions can enhance awareness and scrutiny of the problem and its possible solutions (Feldman & Hart, 2018; Nabi et al., 2018). To date, fear has probably gained most attention in research (Chapman et al., 2017). However, in Gardiner’s case negative emotions like doubt and guilt might be more relevant, though research on them is scant in climate change communication.

Taking doubt first, Chapter 1 hopefully indicated that the perfect moral storm gives reasons to doubt humankind's ability to ethically deal with the climate crisis. Marlon et al. (2019) have made in their theory-heavy survey study a distinction between constructive and fatalistic doubt. The former is a perception that something can be done to the climate crisis, but is not, and that there are significant yet surmountable obstacles on the way. The latter also notes obstacles but sees them as unsurmountable. The reasons can be, for instance, religious fatalism ("God has His plans"), cynicism about humanity ("can't help the selfishness of mankind") or simple pessimism ("too difficult, not going to work, why bother"). An important result of Marlon et al. was that constructive doubt, when combined with constructive hope (that will be discussed below), was significantly associated with stronger climate action intentions and policy support, while fatalistic doubt was independently negatively associated with both. While constructive doubt fruitfully makes the threat and its possible solutions salient, fatalistic doubt eats away efficacy. Which type of doubt defensive ethics incites?

Darrel Moellendorf (2014, pp. 201–202) has argued that Gardiner's "general suspicion" of moral corruption approaches something akin to fatalistic doubt. Moellendorf describes it as "self-refuting". Gardiner (2017b, pp. 463–464) has retorted that the moral corruption diagnosis is pinpointing specific obstacles, not "affirming total depravity" (see also 3.4). The diagnosis is, according to Gardiner, helping us to protect ourselves from legitimate threats and pointing toward solutions. It should be added that Gardiner is not seeing in the evolutionary developed "human nature" or in the current fundamental moral conceptions any major barriers for ethical climate transitions, in contrast to other notable climate ethicist like Dale Jamieson (e.g., 2013). Instead, Gardiner thinks the obstacles are mostly social, institutional and political, and therefore changeable in shorter timescales. (E.g., the formerly entrenched social attitudes on smoking have changed drastically in just few decades thanks to determined political and social effort (Gardiner, 2017b, p. 440).) All in all, despite the doubt-inducing character of the perfect moral storm, I think there is, at least initially, no special reason to fear fatalistic doubt in Gardiner's case.

Moving on to guilt. Gardiner seldomly discusses guilt directly rather than blame, which, however, is one of the main means to evoke guilt. He is bit hesitant with blaming (see 1.1). Nevertheless, Gardiner (2011a, p. 308) explicitly says that "concerns about blame" are "also important" (though "secondary") and advances them directly for instance in

(Gardiner, 2011b; 2012). Indeed, condemning self-appraisals seem to be very much about blame and guilt. Guilt and blame perhaps remain attractive because, unlike fear and doubt, they are directly connected to morality. Bilandzic et al. (2017, p. 473) summarize: “Guilt is evoked when a person behaves inconsistently with norm and value conceptions and believes that the behavior harms other persons or the community”. Guilt seems to be an important part of the stinging feeling the morally corrupt hopefully feel after receiving the “treatment” of defensive ethics. Bilandzic et al. (Ibid., p. 463) echo Gardiner when they argue that guilt and moral motivations are vital to get people motivated in the wealthy North, where the direct effects of climate change may currently produce relatively weak feelings of personal threat, but at the same time high and immediate investments on climate transitions are demanded. Indeed, their experiment²⁰ indicates that among these audiences, guilt induced by a loss-frame (e.g. “if we fail to mitigate climate change, we will exploit future generations”) was effectively evoking “willingness to sacrifice” resources and comfort for mitigation policies (Ibid., pp. 483-484; see also Lu & Schuldt, 2015). If willingness to sacrifice is what is needed to motivate climate transitions in the North (c.f. Stoknes, 2014, pp. 162–163), then Gardiner’s tactics might be on the right track.

There are reservations. Firstly, the value-behavior conflict might have to be relatively apparent for the subjects (Bilandzic et al., 2017; see also Stone & Fernandez, 2008). This might be an obstacle in case of the morally corrupt, for whom, by definition, the moral case is not that clear anymore. The goal is, of course, to make it clear again. But this might be easier said than done, if moral corruption is caused by strong, structurally embedded interests or perceptions. The question is how much the structures must change before guilt-inducing tactics are effective for the corrupt. Relatedly, the problem of balancing between moving guilt and paralyzing defensiveness has not disappeared: too big “dose” of guilt might backfire (Bilandzic et al., 2017, p. 484; see also Schneider et al., 2017, pp. 8–10). Along the same lines, it has been suggested that if people feel the threat of rejection or humiliation because of blaming, they are more likely to react defensively (Bain & Bongiorno, 2020, pp. 2–3; Stone & Fernandez, 2008, pp. 1037–

²⁰ The study had 247 German participants. The participants were divided into three groups that read a news article, each with a different framing. Afterwards they filled out a questionnaire about perceived threat, emotions, and willingness to sacrifice.

1038). It is also notable that Gardiner's tactics seem generally more severe and direct than the ones used in the research.²¹

Next, I discuss the efficacy component and positive emotions. The two are commonly associated, though the connection is not simple here either. Probably the most studied and debated positive emotion in climate change communication is hope. It is intuitive to think that hope increases both efficacy and motivation for climate transitions, but recent research has conditioned these connections (Bilandzic et al., 2017; Feldman & Hart, 2018; Hornsey & Fielding, 2016; Marlon et al., 2019). Marlon et al. (2019) distinguish false hope from constructive hope. False hope is overt optimism that "everything will be alright"; the climate problem is not that serious since, say, a technological fix will be developed before things get too bad. Marlon et al. found that false hope had a negative effect on engagement with climate transitions. Gardiner is sensitive to the risk of overt optimism and goes further in arguing that dangerous complacency threatens even those who "at least do something" for the climate crisis. Given the single-action bias, insufficient or completely superficial "shadow solutions" might be enough to lower our level of concern (Gardiner, 2011a, pp. 128, 140). Nonetheless, the importance of hope appraisals for efficacy is also supported by research, especially when they are combined with more alerting messages inducing constructive fear or doubt (Feldman & Hart, 2018; Marlon et al., 2019; Nabi et al., 2018).

It seems that defensive tactics are lacking in terms of constructive hope and other potentially efficacy-promoting positive emotions like pride (cf. Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016, p. 72; on pride see Schneider et al., 2017). Gardiner is relatively silent on them compared to, say, Peeters et al. (2019, pp. 436–442). Directly provoking feeling of efficacy and positive moral emotions about climate action is a solid part of their strategy against moral corruption. Given that studies show a significant lack of hope in the successful mitigation of the climate crisis (at least among the US publics, Marlon et al., 2019, p. 12), and that the climate crisis might be an especially disheartening problem (Heald, 2017, p. 5), the risk that defensive ethics is psychologically too heavy for the morally corrupt is worthy of attention. As Heald (2017, p. 10) and Markowitz & Shariff

²¹ For instance, Lu & Schuldt (2015) only "primed incidental guilt" in the subjects by asking them to describe the last time they felt guilty. Bilandzic et al. (2017) asked how guilty participants felt after reading the experiment material.

(2012, p. 245) suggest, it might make strategic sense at least not to privilege negative appraisals.

Yet all in all, the assessment does not turn out too bad for Gardiner, given the incomplete and uncertain character of the current empirical evidence. With reserves, it can be concluded that some of the defensive tactics are preliminary supported by empirical evidence, and the effects of the more problematic tactics are ambiguous rather than outright bad. There are risks worthy of attention, too. The most notable are related to the self-condemning and guilt-inducing messages and underdeveloped direct support for constructive positive emotions. Despite the ambiguities and the risks, the suspicion of wishful thinking seems not that warranted here.

Nonetheless, transition ethics should be reflexively adapted in the face of constantly evolving empirical evidence. Therefore, it is not so important that Gardiner “passed” my brief assessment, but that similar yet way broader assessments become a routine part of transition ethics. Nevertheless, the next sub-section shows that defensive ethics faces more severe wishful thinking accusations related to its basis, the moral corruption diagnosis. So, even though defensive ethics would work for the morally corrupt, it is not clear how far transition ethics can get with that.

2.3 Wishful grounds of the moral corruption diagnosis

This section discusses the diagnostic assumption that was granted above: the morally corrupt are prominent (enough) in the North, either in terms of quantity or political influence. By “prominent” I mean that they are so numerous or influential that it is justified to privilege them as the target of transition ethics, as Gardiner does. Here the suspicion of wishful thinking arises for two reasons: Firstly, the assumption is vital in Gardiner’s ethical project. It makes it possible to argue that the ethical concerns he advocates are indispensable in solving the climate problem. Crucially, the morally corrupt are *really* recognizing the ethical reasons for climate transitions, though they are disengaged from them. Secondly, Gardiner is not explicitly offering any proper empirical substantiation for the assumption but is rather referring to his “intuitions” and “experience” (Gardiner, 2013, pp. 107–108).

This alone may be enough to justify the accusation of wishful thinking. However, what seems to save Gardiner from the immediate accusations is the recent argument by Peeters et al. that the moral corruption diagnosis has been corroborated by research on moral disengagement. So, even though Gardiner is not drawing the connection, I assess seriously what kind of support the research gives to the moral corruption diagnosis. To be clear, I am not doubting that moral corruption is a real phenomenon contributing to climate transition inertia. Instead, I argue that the current moral disengagement research cannot substantiate the *prominence* of moral corruption, an assumption that justifies the defensive approach in transition ethics. Therefore, given the convenience of the diagnosis and Gardiner's lack of engagement with empirical evidence, the suspicion of wishful thinking seems severe. I lay out the argument in Sub-section 2.3.1 and present and answer some objections in Sub-section 2.3.2.

2.3.1 Thin empirical grounds for the prominence of moral corruption

The crux of the argument is a distinction that both Gardiner and Peeters et al. fail to make. Witnessing “the mechanisms” of moral corruption is not by itself enough to prove its existence, since very similar maneuvers are associated with a related but, regarding transition ethics, crucially different psychological phenomenon, i.e., defensive motivated reasoning²². The difference is that while corruption is about selectively “switching-off” (Hindriks, 2015, p. 246) or “circumventing” (Heald, 2017, pp. 5–6) internalized moral standards, defensive reasoning is about reaffirming, buttressing or defending existing moral standards in a biased way, that is, in a way that is inconsiderate about truth, accuracy or adequacy of the standards (Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Haidt, 2001; Hindriks, 2015, p. 245; Seidel, 2016, p. 282). Moral corruption is a problem of application rather than principle. In contrast, defensive reasoning is baring internalization of certain principles or beliefs at expense of protecting some prior beliefs, principles, values or interests. A stereotype of defensive reasoners is dogmatic adherents of “extreme” political ideologies, but political

²² Sometimes the phenomenon is simply called “motivated reasoning” but this may be misleading as all reasoning is somehow “motivated” (Druckman & McGrath, 2019). “Directional reasoning” is more accurate a term (Ibid.), but I prefer the immediately intelligible descriptor “defensive” (e.g. Haidt, 2001, p. 821). See also Seidel's (2016, p. 282) alternative, “anticipated moral reproach”.

psychologists have argued that defensive reasoning and related biases are politics as usual (Lodge & Taber, 2013).

In his review of climate change psychology and communication, Stoknes (2014) draws a similar distinction. According to him, moral corruption²³ “contributes to explaining why – even if people are concerned [about climate change] – they tend to avoid the issue or give it less importance”. Stoknes distinguishes the morally corrupt from defensive reasoners²⁴, who might be also paradoxically somehow “aware” of the problem, but still either actively denying it or its importance. Defensive reasoners might be motivated by perceived threats of mitigation policies to their “income, profession or status” or fundamental ideological beliefs, like economic growth, nationalism and freedom of the market. The key difference between the two types of people is that defensive reasoners hold values or interests that they see as threatened by the ethical ramifications of the climate crisis or, rather, climate policies. In contrast to the morally corrupt, defensive reasoners do not *really* or *deep-down* get the ethical stakes of the climate crisis. They do not have any problems of *internal* coherence since they do not think that mitigation is an ethical priority.

Importantly, the morally corrupt and defensive reasoners might be hard to tell apart in practice. Stoknes lists almost indistinguishably similar psychological maneuvers used by both. For example, both try to explain away their responsibility by appealing to their small contribution and pointing towards the far bigger emissions of distant others (the Chinese, the Indians...). Furthermore, Stoknes argues that the two types of people or phenomena are connected. On the one hand, defensive reasoning “can be fueled by” moral corruption; Stoknes perhaps means by this that moral corruption can eventually escalate into defensive reasoning.²⁵ On the other hand, the morally corrupt create “a demand side for the messages of doubt” supplied by defensive reasoners (see also Gardiner, 2011a, p. 308). (Stoknes, 2014, pp. 163–165).

²³ Stoknes’ term for moral corruption is “dissonance” – supposedly, though misleadingly, after one of its proximate reasons, cognitive dissonance.

²⁴ Stoknes’ term for defensive motivated reasoning is “denial”. I find it unsatisfying, since “denial” is often strongly associated with denying the reality of (human-caused) climate change, which is perhaps only one means for defensive reasoners.

²⁵ I.e., both may be on the same continuum of disengagement. This forms a counter point to my argument: there are just different intensities of moral corruption, not two importantly different yet superficially similar and associated phenomena. I answer firstly that even granting the point, it does not follow that one can effectively treat the two similarly in transition ethics. Secondly, all defensive reasoners may not share “the origin story” of progressive detachment from their former climate crisis concerns.

The fact that the morally corrupt and defensive reasoners are rather similar overall but different in one fundamental respect – the level of deep-down recognition of the ethical demands and concerns of the climate crisis – poses difficulties for transition ethics. One immediate issue is that it is possible that the morally corrupt and defensive reasoners need a different treatment to be motivated for climate transitions. Granted, targeting only the morally corrupt is a restriction of transition ethics that Gardiner (2011a, p. 308) makes explicitly. He says that the target of transition ethics *is not* people that are *not* genuinely moved by the ethical concerns of the climate crisis, but the victims of moral corruption who need rationalizations when breaching the ethical demands they do in fact recognize. In other words, transition ethics targets only those who are suffering from a kind of motivational problem, rather than not just getting the ethics.

Yet the restriction or, rather, its justification (offered by Peeters et al.) may be problematic. The reason is that empirical corroboration of the moral corruption diagnosis gets from the research is not that strong. Next few paragraphs elaborate this claim.

It has been already pointed out that the morally corrupt and defensive reasoners might be, at least in the climate case, closely associated and employing similar social-psychological maneuvers. Empirical difficulties with distinguishing the two are to be expected. Still, as Peeters et al. note, moral corruption as a phenomenon has apparently gained empirical corroboration, though mostly in contexts other than climate transitions (see Moore, 2015). Reynolds et al. (2014, p. 126) challenge the claim. They argue that the empirical studies on moral corruption have often assumed rather than actually tested the crucial differentiating factor between the morally corrupt and defensive reasoners, that is, the existence of initially (or “deep-down”) approved moral principles that are detached from action with the mechanisms of corruption. By only assuming this factor and then checking if people resort to some of the mechanisms, as is often done in the research, it is not possible to tell apart the two types, since both the morally corrupt and defensive reasoners use highly similar maneuvers. Some the studies even seem to elide the distinction completely (see Graça et al., 2016, p. 362; Moore, 2015, p. 200).

Moreover, as is noted by Gardiner, people using and approving corrupt arguments can be also “merely mistaken” (see 1.1; see also Reynolds et al., 2014, p. 135). Importantly, the mistaken are “hard to isolate” from the morally corrupt (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 308)

and, it should be added, defensive reasoners. After all, the corrupt arguments are not often clearly, universally or unquestionably bad rather than used inappropriately (Ibid., p. 307). It is no wonder that mistakes happen, given results in moral psychology suggesting that people in general do have quite variable ethical reasoning abilities (Haidt, 2001; Reynolds et al., 2014). In sum, in the empirical studies – and perhaps maybe in climate political practice – victims of moral corruption, defensive reasoners, and merely mistaken are not easily distinguished from each other. This problem of “observational equivalence” (Druckman & McGrath, 2019, p. 114) is often neglected.

Indeed, one of the very few empirical studies on moral corruption in the context of climate change might suffer from this kind of limitation. Stoll-Kleemann & O’Riordan (2020) found out in their qualitative survey of 1032 German participants²⁶ that though most of the respondents were to some extent concerned about climate change, advocated its mitigation in the abstract and ascribed responsibility for mitigation to many different actors, they were not so willing to do themselves the individual level actions²⁷ that have the biggest impact on greenhouse gas emissions. Analyzing the answers to a set of open questions where people could explain their answers to multiple choice items, authors reported five out of the eight Bandurian mechanisms of moral corruption. Yet, as the authors admit, the corrupt mechanisms and similar legitimate arguments are hard to draw apart (Ibid., pp. 943–944). For instance, it is a completely legitimate discussion even in academic climate ethics and political philosophy whether individuals have a direct responsibility for their emissions (see e.g. Gardiner, 2011b). The same arguments can be corrupt or non-corrupt (but perhaps mistaken), depending on the context. The argument itself matters less than the function to which it is employed. For instance, if one questions individual-level climate responsibilities to free oneself of all the ethical demands they otherwise note as credible (including political responsibilities like voting for “climate friendly” candidates) then the suspicion of moral corruption should be high.

A further problem of the empirical moral corruption studies, considering the corroboration they should give to Gardiner’ diagnosis, is the fact that moral corruption has been treated in some of them as an inherent, personal trait (i.e., “propensity to

²⁶ The survey was done in 2017. It was not completely representative. There were proportionally too many respondents from the oldest age cohort (Stoll-Kleemann & O’Riordan, 2020, p. 942).

²⁷ The pre-given list of proposed actions unfortunately contained only one clearly “political” action in the ordinary sense of the term: willingness to participate in climate campaigns.

morally disengage”). This conflicts with Bandura’s (and Gardiner’s) theory, which defines moral corruption as a situated psychological process that almost all of us are vulnerable to in certain circumstances (Graça et al., 2016, p. 354; see Moore, 2015). Thus, Graça et al. (2016, p. 354; see also Reynolds et al., 2014, pp. 126, 135) argue that “the core” of the moral corruption hypothesis cannot be tested without evidence on the processes of corruption. To note, Gardiner’s main allegory of moral corruption, the Dashwoods from *Sense and Sensibility*, is precisely a story of a step-by-step process of moral corruption. Incremental and subtle social/psychological dynamics of moral corruption can be described fascinatingly in literature and journalism (see e.g. Anne Applebaum’s (2020) essay on moral corruption of Republican politicians in the Trump era). However, capturing the processes of corruption in empirical research may require some ingenious experimental settings and long timeframes, which have been absent so far.

In sum, and *contra* Peeters et al., the corroboration Gardiner’s moral corruption diagnosis gains from the empirical research on moral disengagement is not that strong, mostly due to the problems of observational equivalence and the lack of direct evidence on the processes of corruption. Therefore, consequently, the strong assumption that in the case of climate transition inertia the morally corrupt are prominent in the North is not supported by the same evidence. Gardiner states that defensive transition ethics focuses almost exclusively on the motivation problem of the morally corrupt – people not so concerned about the ethical climate problem are “another story” (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 10). Yet the justification of the focus on moral corruption rests on an assumption that “most of us” are “decent” people recognizing the ethical issues of the climate crisis (Ibid., pp. 62, 338 n. 1). Given Gardiner’s failure to cite empirical evidence for the assumption and the lacking evidence cited by others, the suspicion of wishful thinking is severe.

2.3.2 Objections

I consider three objections to the wishful thinking critique presented in this section. First of them is that there may be another way for warranting the prominence of moral corruption: the general survey studies on whether and to what extent people in the North recognize climate change as a problem and are concerned about it. As it is clearly the

case that most people are concerned about climate change and see it as a serious problem, then the main explanation for the inertia must not be a lack of the ethical appreciations on the climate crisis, but something akin to moral corruption. As already said, my point is not to refute all possible ways to empirically substantiate the privileged status of moral corruption in transition ethics. But I briefly consider this alternative since it may have been “too obvious” for Gardiner to explicitly formulate it. One could argue that in the same sense that it can be safely assumed that, say, most people in Finland currently support democracy, one can grant that most people in the North see climate change as an acute ethical problem, no matter what their other commitments happen to be. Essentially, the objection is that I complain distractively about a matter that is settled and that the discussion should move on.

According to some recent polls, it is indeed the case that 66% of Americans are at least somewhat worried about climate change (Leiserowitz et al., 2020), and as many as 91% of EU citizens think it is at least a fairly serious problem (Special Eurobarometer 490, 2019). The difficulty is that people can be concerned or worried for many reasons, and they might not be the specific ethical reasons Gardiner has in mind. Usually, the opinion surveys are too general to settle this issue. Perhaps more solid evidence for Gardiner is that most Americans notice that climate change is harming the ethically relevant victims, that is, the current poor (67%), people in “developing countries” (66%), future generations of people (73%), and “plant and animal species” (73%) (Leiserowitz et al., 2020, p. 16). Yet, even these perceptions, which indeed are a key condition for the ethical appreciations at the heart of Gardiner’s account, do not necessarily translate into perceived individual or collective ethical demands or responsibilities. Gardiner explains the apparent translation failure by moral corruption, which might be a part of the explanation. But there is another plausible explanation. Some people might perceive the harms but may not give them priority in their honest and uncorrupt ethical judgement (note that the fact that an understanding is uncorrupt does not make it right) (Kasperbauer, 2016, p. 362). Here it suffices to note that evidence from mere perception of harm is not enough to prove the prominence of moral corruption.

To my knowledge, there is only one survey study focusing on ethical perceptions on climate change, namely (Markowitz, 2012)²⁸. The results were that only 45% of

²⁸ The study was unfortunately done already almost a decade ago. Yet it is notable that it was published not long after *A Perfect Moral Storm*.

participants explicitly recognized climate change as an ethical issue, and out of them, roughly half mentioned reasons akin to Gardiner's account. This was despite the fact that the target group (university students) did more strongly believe in the reality of climate change than the US population in general. Markowitz's concludes that "the situation may be even worse than Gardiner -- assumes, because it may not be the case that most (or even very many) non-experts and non-philosophers understand climate change in ethical terms (much less that they fall prey to 'moral corruption')"²⁹ (Ibid., p. 490).

The second objection is that Gardiner is not, contrary to what I have implied, assuming that people have relatively specific ethical concerns about the climate crisis (namely, that they are exploiting the poor, future generations and nature). He simply supposes that most people do recognize broader spatiotemporal purviews as ethically significant than the current institutions do. Centrally, people do have a general ethical concern about future generations, and they do recognize that it is morally severe to impose hazards on them (Gardiner, 2011b, p. 48). This might be enough of a reason to focus on moral corruption in transition ethics.

However, just any concern about future generations will not do. Gardiner (Ibid.) is right to state that "appeal to the interests of the future is a perennially popular political strategy". Yet these appeals can be very varied, and all of them might not contain a wide enough purview. For instance, in the Finnish political discourse (as presumably in elsewhere too) it is indeed perennial to argue that growing public debt is an unacceptable burden that we place on future generations. The argument was recently revived during the COVID-19 crisis by authoritative economists' report for the Finnish government on how to deal with economic havoc caused by the pandemic (Vihriälä et al., 2020, pp. 86–89). Experts in sustainability and environmental sciences retorted that restricting growth of the public debt too much and too quickly means that funding for the acute climate and ecological transitions might be compromised (Toivonen, 2020; BIOS, 2020). In other words, and as is well-recognized by Gardiner himself (e.g. Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016, pp. 68–71), even explicit appeals to "the interests of future generations" can mean almost anything. For instance, sometimes "future generations"

²⁹ It could be complained that since moral corruption can pervert the original ethical beliefs, the results might underestimate its significance. But this takes us back to the problem discussed in the previous subsection: evidence on the processes of corruption is needed to settle the question.

might mean only the interests of “our children”, literally speaking, rather than all generations to come suffering from climate disruptions millennia ahead. Gardiner could reply that the narrow interpretations of the interests of future are precisely a sign of moral corruption. Again, this is indeed one option and perhaps partly true. The other option is that some people genuinely do not see the long-term future as an ethical priority. Since it is not obvious how prominent each position is, the suspicion of wishful thinking remains.

The last objection is that the empirical studies cited above focus mostly on the level of individuals, but the moral corruption diagnosis does not. Gardiner (2013, pp. 110–112) argues that the main “subject” of moral corruption is not individuals or groups (i.e. “agents”) but “the public discourse around climate change”. Additionally, he characterizes climate transition inertia as an institutional “grasping problem” (Gardiner, 2011b, pp. 51–52), which points to the thick institutional roots of moral corruption. In the climate crisis, our mundane practices and appraisals fail to “grasp” the fact that the practices themselves, or the collective outcomes caused by them, are seriously inconsistent with our fundamental moral values. The heavily emissive lifestyles centered on consumption are bolstered by the current system and are seen as largely innocent, despite seriousness of the climate hazards is recognized. In a word, we are stuck with our current temporally and spatially narrowminded institutions and practices (above all, the nation states and market systems), though we know better. Agent-related moral corruption is only a “secondary matter” (Gardiner, 2013, p. 111), or a symptom of a wider structural disease.

The importance of structures, institutions and social context for moral corruption is theoretically noted also in climate change communications (Moser, 2016, p. 350) and by some moral and social psychologists of environmental crises (Bandura, 2007; Schmitt et al., 2020). Bandura (2007, pp. 11–12) describes moral corruption not as a collection of individual beliefs, but as an emergent phenomenon where “network of participants [are] vindicating harmful practices”. His example here is the tobacco industry, where every contributing agent sees herself just as a decent practitioner that “got bills to pay”. Yet, collectively the participants, all with their own small share, reproduce a hugely harmful industry. In sum, the (lacking) individual level evidence for the prominence of moral corruption is not that relevant but the fact that our societies are dominated by

narrowminded institutions breeding moral corruption, which is something we can rather safely assume in transition ethics.

I am not denying the institutional causes of moral corruption, or more generally the interplay of structures and psychological moral agency. The different moral psychological types, like the morally corrupt and defensive reasoners, are not given, independent or irreducible. Yet for the task of motivating climate transitions in the short amount of time we have left, the level of agents stays relevant. It seems correct that the morally corrupt and other laggard agents are properly healed only by overhauling the institutions driving their malady. But it is likely that one must mobilize politically a significant number of agents to achieve the institutional overhaul, at least in the relatively democratic societies of the North. However, the original difficulty is not removed since we may have to mobilize agents mostly “as they are”, for there may not be enough time for a large-scale bottom-up moral “re-education” (which is a project that should be kept going, nevertheless). In other words, to mobilize people for climate transitions in the short timescale emissions must go down, one may have to engage them in terms of their current *de facto* values and moral beliefs. The critical question remains open: how big share of agents are just disengaged from their real climate ethical values, and how big share is more profoundly not recognizing the values.

In sum, the objections do not push away the suspicion of wishful thinking. Gardiner’s quick assumption on what type of moral agency is prominent in the North (the morally corrupt, not defensive reasoners, the mistaken or others) is conveniently making the prospects look good for ethical climate transitions – transition ethics needs to, under the assumption, defensively fight moral corruption so that people can tap into their preexistent but disengaged ethical concerns for transitional motivation. However, Gardiner does not offer proper empirical substantiation for the assumption, and even a quick assessment of some salient evidence in current social and moral psychology reveals major uncertainties. Granted, moral corruption might well be *a* focus of transition ethics among others. But for now, I conclude that assuming the prominence of the morally corrupt and accordingly privileging the defensive approach in transition ethics risks wishful thinking.

2.4 Perennial threat of the twin vices

The chapter has examined Gardiner's defensive transition ethics and its diagnostic basis, the account of moral corruption. I showed that defensive ethics is based on distinct idealized assumptions on the kind of climate ethical agency presumably prevalent in the Global North. This morally corrupt agency is such that moral motivation (and especially the concern against exploitation of nature, the global poor and the future generations) seems like the best basis for building and maintaining popular motivation for climate transitions. The moral corruption diagnosis makes intelligible the defensive *modus operandi* of Gardiner's transition ethics. It also conditions transitional arguments and principles, the ethical materials used in agency-building.

I argued that it is uncertain should the moral corruption diagnosis have such a central role in transition ethics, given that the challenge is to advance drastic climate transitions in just few decades. Section 2.2 concluded that based on the current evidence from climate change communication, Gardiner's defensive arguments and tactics (or, specifically, their emotional elements) may work against the morally corrupt, though significant uncertainties remain. However, Section 2.3 revealed the main limitation: the key assumption on prevalence of the morally corrupt is not that strongly substantiated in terms of social and moral psychological research.

The point is not to argue that the quick assessments above are the full and ultimate interpretation of relevant empirical research. Rather, I argued that a theoretical vice of wishful thinking needs to be considered here. This concluding section elaborates a ubiquitous normative tension that I argue explains transition ethics' vulnerability to wishful thinking. This is the tension between concession and non-concession of the sound ethical principles and motivations. I make three concluding points related to the tension. I argue, firstly, that the weighing approach of transition ethics initially evokes the tension and the threat of wishful thinking. Yet, secondly, transition ethicists might cope well enough with the threat if they remain properly flexible and mindful about the levels of concession of their accounts. This may help them to keep the diagnoses properly separated from the ethical concerns and enhance their *audience-sensitivity*. But, thirdly, guarding against wishful thinking may lead to another theoretical vice

related to interaction of diagnostic and prescriptive moments of transition ethics, namely, *strategic inconsiderateness*.

I start from the first point. As is explained in Sub-chapter 1.2.2, concessive theory needs to weigh against each other moral permissibility of transitional policies and their political possibility, effectiveness, likelihood and accessibility in our circumstances. Crucially, concessive theory is inconclusive in the sense that its normative components cannot be weighed and prioritized *apriori*. Though all components must be considered in each case, contextual issues and uncertainties should affect conclusions on their specific balances. In other words, it remains open (*apriori*) what sound moral principles (and to what extent) concessive transition ethicists should yield in the name of practicability. So, there is a tension between the two wants of concessive transition ethics: being part of practicable solution to the climate problem (concession) and advocating the best ethical means and reasons to solve the problem (non-concession).

Gardiner touches upon the tension while discussing self-interest and win-win arguments. In that context, his take on the tension manifests similar tendencies that expose him to wishful thinking in the case of moral corruption, so brief elaboration is in place. In win-wins it is claimed that both future generations and the current generation will benefit from climate transitions. Therefore, one can and should motivate the current generation also with self-interested reasons, like health benefits of climate friendly lifestyles and well-paying jobs in the green industry (Pollin, 2018; Bain et al., 2016; Ballew et al., 2019; cf. Markowitz & Shariff, 2012).

Gardiner (2011a, p. 68) questions effectiveness of win-wins, though he admits there are reasons to continue use them “at least some extent” (2017a, p. 29; see also 2011a, pp. 69–71). But he also has ethical misgivings: win-wins “risk obscuring what is [ethically] at stake in climate change” (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 68). Some win-wins, even if they were motivationally effective, would only solve “the *practical* problem” of the climate crisis, not “the *moral* problem” (Gardiner, 2017a, p. 29, original emphasis). They “would demonstrate only that the current generation is capable of pursuing its own interests” (Ibid.). People should not act on the crisis for just any reasons but for the credible moral reasons. Gardiner (2011a, p. 68) states that “calling on altruistic and distinctively ethical motivations is *not only necessary, but also has significant strategic advantages*” (my emphasis).

Gardiner expresses the tension of non-concession and concession as the tension of “the ethical” and “the practical”. He seems to strongly emphasize the former over the latter. Although this thesis partly adopts similar use of language for reasons of convenience, it should be noted that the dichotomous terminology risks a misleading appropriation of “the ethical” for (more) non-concessive theory. Estlund’s point is that both concession and non-concession are elements of ethical theory. Levels and areas of concession of a theory are results of ethical reasoning, which factors in effectiveness, accessibility, likelihood and political possibility. Shortly put, concessive theory is ethics.

Therefore, I think it is more accurate to put the tension in terms of concession and non-concession. It is also fairer to climate ethicists arguing seriously for more concessive approaches. The most prominent of them is John Broome (2017). He argues that the goal of international climate negotiations should be “efficiency without sacrifice”, that is, carbon pricing policies (including compensations) that are in the self-interest of all current people and future generations (Ibid., pp. 19–20). Broome admits the concession: his solution would not be the (most) just or good (Ibid., pp. 15, 18), or at least it would not demand people acting for the right moral reasons.

Though it is ambiguous how far Broome’s suggestion is from the moral ideal and what role he leaves for moral motivations (see Bernstein, 2016), the key point is that he is doing serious concessive ethical theory. In contrast to arguments of “the Chicago lawyers” (i.e., Eric Posner, David Weisbach and Cass Sunstein who also Gardiner sternly objects (see e.g. Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016)), Broome is not trying to lift people from the demands of climate justice or compensation (Bernstein, 2016, pp. 184–186). Rather, he defends a premise that moral demands (including sacrifice from the current rich) have so far failed to be an effective and sufficiently motivating basis of international climate policy and are unlikely to become such in the short time available for climate transitions (Broome, 2017, p. 11–12). In the spirit of concessive theory (see Estlund, 2014, pp. 124–125), Broome argues what should be done given the premise, without invalidating and cancelling the non-concessive principles of climate justice.

Despite his misleading wording about the ethical and the practical, I argue that Gardiner too sees the need for weighing between concession and non-concession. Though in the case of win-wins he claims that advocating the ethical motivations is as such “necessary”, he still discusses and factors in the “strategic advantages”. Ethical

soundness is not all that transition ethics is after; it also wants to help in motivating climate transitions. Here is where the threat of wishful thinking arises. There is a strong temptation to “have it both ways”, to see that the ethical principles are also sufficiently motivating. I have argued above that in the case of moral corruption diagnosis (or, more accurately, the assumption on the prevalence of moral corruption), the threat is real. Though the impression of weighing is retained in Gardiner’s defensive ethics, certain non-concessive ethical concerns seem to condition *apriori* how the problem is seen and how much or, rather, how little empirical substantiation the moral corruption diagnosis gets. Gardiner seems to assume away the tension of concessive theory “too easily”, that is, without making any inconvenient concessions exemplified by Broome’s approach.

Some may insist that Gardiner’s privileging of “the ethical” is not surprising. For him the climate crisis is essentially an ethical problem; any worthy solution to it must be ethical to start with. A crucial part of any ethical solution is that climate transitions are done, at least for the most part, for the self-realized and credible ethical reasons. If ethical reasons cannot motivate us (which Gardiner thinks is not the case), then it may not be the business of ethics to guide agency-building. Rather, perhaps ethics should occupy itself with “bearing witness”, that is, keeping us aware of our miserable failures (Gardiner 2011a, p. 437). Some may also accuse Gardiner’s transition ethics from “political moralism” – the pet peeve of many political realists (Estlund, 2017; Williams, 2005, pp. 1–3) – in the sense that abstract moral theory categorically overrides and conditions other normative considerations pertinent to practical situations. This charge implies that fundamental methodological assumptions on the role and powers of moral theory pervert transition ethics’ idea of action-guidance.

I think that these interpretations are misguided. Firstly, Gardiner (e.g. 2011a, ch. 10; see also Roser, 2016) imagines that ethics can have various tasks in the climate crisis that are not mutually exclusive. There is a clear circumstantial motive for philosophers to do transition ethics now rather than, for instance, *just* gradually develop the ideal theory of justice. The motive is helping in getting the acute climate transitions done. So, though Gardiner maintains that getting the non-concessive ethics right is valuable, it does not rule out concessive transition ethics. Secondly, I claim that there is nothing “methodological” in Gardiner’s undue privileging of “the ethical”. It is true that he is often defending the centrality of ethical considerations in the climate crisis against tendencies to marginalize or hide them in the name of “economic realism” or “pure

policy” (Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016, pp. 7–9, 47–48). Yet it must be remembered that Gardiner subsumes various normative considerations under “ethics”. He is explicitly rejecting approaches that impose one-sided and abstract moral theories on reality, in the same vein as he is rejecting privileging of self-interest, economics and pure policy. I bet Gardiner would not have troubles to call with political realists for “complex, subtle and situated conceptions of ethical life and moral value and agency” (Philp, 2012, p. 634). Therefore, I argue he is afflicted by the theoretical vice of wishful thinking rather than political moralism.

To the second concluding remark. It is perhaps easy for transition ethicists to avoid wishful thinking, in principle at least. The diagnostic part is by definition ethically loaded, but it simply should not make certain ethical concerns and agencies to look more accessible than they really are, no matter how credible they are. What might help to keep it that way is pursuing flexibility and reflectivity on (non-)concessions made in transition ethics and noting their purpose for the goal of agency-building. As Chapter 3 concludes, transition ethicists may have reasons to stay non-concessive about certain ethical demands. If they stay aware of their concessions, it may be also easier to let the non-concessive demands guide the diagnostic eye (e.g. what kind of features and tendencies are interesting) but simultaneously avoid wishful thinking in the diagnosis.

My conjecture is that in Gardiner’s case further audience-sensitivity and localization might help to evaluate the appropriateness of (non-)concessions. One of the few agreements in climate change communication is that there is high variation between different audiences, and that effective communication must tap into specific values, identities, positions, worldviews etc. of a given audience (Chapman et al., 2017; Moser, 2016; Pihkala, 2017; Täuber et al., 2015, p. 462). In contrast, there is a notable push for universality in the moral corruption diagnosis: it tries to capture general climate ethical agency and moral psychological condition of the people of the North. It abstracts away multiple differences between the target agents, like socio-economic class, social locations, power asymmetries, political attachments and minority identities. Indeed, the diagnosis has it that despite all our multiple and otherwise ethically and politically relevant differences, in the climate crisis most of us habit an ethically corrupting power position. This is a valuable insight, and it could be very motivating, say, among academic crowds (like in the discussion on geoengineering, see Gardiner, 2011a, ch. 10). Nevertheless, wishful thinking might overplay its significance. Pursuing flexibility

may clarify that it is neither necessary nor perhaps advisable to chase the catch-all idealized agency that resonates with most of the agents of the North.

Thus, perhaps it is good to localize transition ethics and consider more specific audiences. Indeed, recent contributions in “non-ideal” climate ethics have discussed the role of moral motivation at least in specific contexts of the UNFCCC negotiations (Pickering, 2016; Seidel, 2016) and the IPCC Assessment Reports (Kowarsch & Edenhofer, 2016). Localization may also demand a “richer” purview from transition ethics. The motivational prospects of ethics do not float free from other social, political and historical aspects and structures. For instance, Mills (2005, pp. 168–169, 175) reminds that if a theory truly wishes to guide action, it cannot neglect cognitive effects of social locations and histories/realities of injustice and oppression.

Yet, to make the final concluding point of the chapter, it is not that easy. Even if localization and audience-sensitivity would help with wishful thinking, they make transition ethics vulnerable to another theoretical vice that I call strategic inconsiderateness. As the twin vice to wishful thinking, it concedes too much in the name of what presumably “works”. Lamb & Lane (2016, p. 241) describe well a central worry about the vice: though considering specificities of audiences is crucial, it should not reduce transition ethics to technocratic guiding of “elite strategic deployment of one-off cases of manipulative communication”.

The practical attitude of some non-ideal climate ethicists – like the tendency to think morality as a double-edged sword for motivation (see Pickering, 2016; Seidel, 2016) – may be a case in point. Broome may be also suspected of strategic inconsiderateness: one may object that his assumptions on weakness of moral motivation are too quick and that his distinction of self-interest and moral motivation is too strict (cf. Bernstein, 2016; see Gardiner, 2011a, pp. 69–71). Yet perhaps better suspects can be found among climate change communication scholars (Lamb & Lane, 2016, p. 232), psychologists (see Stoknes, 2014) and the Chicago lawyers (Gardiner & Weisbach, 2016; see Bernstein, 2016). Some of them tend to categorically prioritize effectiveness and self-interest over justice and moral motivation, or, more accurately, employ improperly articulated ethical assumptions hidden under the “neutral” and technocratic goal of effectiveness.

For instance, in climate change communication the questions about ethical laudability of convictions of audiences or communication strategies are often not raised (Lamb & Lane, 2016). It is sometimes recommended, without much of a discussion, that communicators should frame the climate issue also in terms of conservative and traditionalist values (like nationalism) (Markowitz & Shariff, 2012, p. 245; Stoknes, 2014). Some of these may be opposed to ethics of the climate crisis emphasizing, among other things, global justice (see Haidt, 2013, pp. 150–216). This is not to say that one should not use conservative value frames at all, or that all of them are not credible from the perspective of climate ethics. Rather, the vice is about setting, almost by default, the ethical considerations aside in the name of whatever arguably works for the audience in question.

This is not necessarily to deny effectiveness of turning objectionable ethical values or psychological biases “from a barrier into (part of) a solution” (Stoknes, 2014, p. 163; cf. Lamb & Lane, 2016) even though it flirts with elitist manipulation. *Assuming* that this truly is what motivating climate transitions is mostly about, transition ethicists should ask themselves: What is there left for ethicists to do? Would not political strategists and campaigners be more competent in their own job? Yet the worries about strategic inconsiderateness are not limited to the risk of manipulation and self-defeating reduction of ethics to populist political strategy. As wishful thinking, strategic inconsiderateness is about awry interaction of diagnostic and prescriptive moments of transition ethics. In essence, both vices involve overestimating certainty of the current empirical knowledge on the boundaries and structure of human motivation. Wishful thinking involves overestimating power of certain ethical motivations. Strategic inconsiderateness is about overt trust in social and psychological sciences’ ability to draw clear limits of human motivation. An example of the latter may be a tendency among certain psychologists, and arguably also some non-ideal climate ethicist (see e.g. Roser, 2016; Seidel, 2016), to explain climate transition inertia in terms of rigid “psychological barriers” (Schmitt et al. 2020; see 3.4). So, Chapman et al. critique on the neglect of uncertainties in climate change communication (see 2.2.1) should be generalized as a reminder against both wishful thinking and strategic inconsiderateness.

How to mitigate the threat of the twin vices in concessive transition ethics? To answer the question, one may ask what elements in the approach contribute to overestimated and biased empirical assumptions and diagnoses. My general answer is the

indeterminate weighing of concession and non-concession. More specifically and accordingly, the role of concessive transitional principles seems to be the root of problems in both vices. On the one hand, in wishful thinking ethical concerns overtly condition the diagnosis. On the other hand, in strategic inconsiderateness it is hard to say how transitional principles matter anymore, except as a kind of crude consequentialism. The second main chapter of the thesis hopes to find some ways to ease the threat of theoretical vices. It discusses concessive transitional principles and the virtues of modesty and flexibility that they should manifest. The focus moves from the moral corruption diagnosis and issues of interaction to a key transitional principle, the global test. The test is a crucial argument on the way towards institutional overhaul of climate transitions. Importantly, it also introduces the consideration of political legitimacy to transition ethics.

3 Ethical Integrity and Suspicion in Action-Guiding Transition Ethics: The Case of Global Test and Political Legitimacy

Before moving on with the chapter, I summarize the discussion so far. In Chapter 1 I argued that transition ethics aiming to motivate ethical climate transitions is best seen as a *concessive ethical theory*. That is, it is not only after moral permissibility or truth of its prescriptions but weighs them with considerations of practicability (political possibility, effectiveness, likelihood and accessibility) in light of its main goal, that is, immediate ethical agency-building. Concessive transition ethics is *flexible* when it comes to areas and degrees of concession used in the approach.

I distinguished two main moments in concessive transition ethics. The *diagnostic* moment states what the problem is with us. It analyses the unfortunate interaction of institutions and practices, temporal, spatial and epistemic structure of the climate crisis and human psychological propensities. The *prescriptive* moment articulates all the “ethical materials” (principles, criteria, benchmarks, metaphors, arguments etc.) that should help guide action towards ethically motivated climate transitions. In concessive transition ethics, the two moments are *interactive*: diagnosis informs prescriptions, and prescriptions guide diagnosis. Given the circumstances of the theoretical storm, transition ethics should also remain *modest within ethical theory*. Transition ethicists should avoid prejudging contentious ethical questions as far as possible. At least, they should stay aware that their prescriptions are not about an ultimate expression of climate justice.

Chapter 2 concluded that transition ethicists face a risk of twin theoretical vices of wishful thinking and strategic inconsiderateness. I argued that the threat is perennial, since it is rooted in the defining aspect of transition ethics, that is, in the indeterminate weighing between the concessive and non-concessive normative elements. It is tempting to overstate or understate either concession or non-concession. In both vices the role of *action-guiding transitional principles* (widely understood as prescriptive ethical materials) is somehow awry in relation to diagnosis or empirical assessment of the situation. That is, the vices are symptoms of problems in the interaction of prescription and diagnosis.

This chapter aims to find ways for transition ethicists to mitigate the threat of the theoretical vices when making prescriptions. In Chapter 2 the focus was mostly on interaction of diagnosis and prescription of Gardiner's account and how it exposes him to wishful thinking. Here the aim is to get a better idea how the virtues of modesty and flexibility should be understood in transition ethics in light of the vices and the goals of transition ethics. In the end, my argument is that given the acute and uncertain circumstances of transition ethics and the (arguable) need to stay relevant for the global political movement ushering ethical climate transitions, there seem to be limits to modesty. That is, transition ethics should retain a degree of *non-concessive and partly contentious ethical integrity*. The conclusion also informs flexibility in concession: even relatively non-concessive, that is, impracticable but correct ethical prescriptions can be used in the approach, given that their use is justified in terms of the goal of agency-building.

I discuss transitional prescriptions through a specific yet in my opinion crucial argument in Gardiner's political thought, "the minimal global test" (shortly "the global test" or "the test"). The test lays out a "condition of adequacy" or "constraint on acceptability" for the dominant political, social and economic institutions in face of human-caused planetary threats. That is, the test purports to provide the first step towards climate transitions as *an institutional overhaul* by showing why the current institutions and their supporting theories should be rejected. Though Gardiner fails to draw the connection, I argue that the test opens-up discussion on *political legitimacy* that is a key consideration for transition ethics aiming to motivate an institutional overhaul. Simply put, Gardiner's theory of change seems to be that the dominant institutions driving climate heating and moral corruption need to be revealed as illegitimate to their subjects. After that, the subjects can be motivated to overhaul their destructive institutions (or push decision makers to do it).

By analyzing the global test as a criterion of political legitimacy, the chapter tries to find an interpretation of the test that would avoid the theoretical vices as far as possible and help clarifying the limits of flexibility and modesty. The discussed interpretations of the test are embedded in wider approaches to transitional principles. In the end, the approaches will be compared. Thus, my aim is to inform transition ethics more generally than for just one separate argument. The hope is supported by the fact that

political legitimacy should be a central consideration to climate transitions as an institutional overhaul, given Gardiner's theory of change.

Section 3.1 elaborates the global test as a transitional principle. It explains the normative basis of the test provided by Gardiner: most people in the North share a specific moral agency/situation called "the humanity's perspective". Gardiner (2011a, pp. 228–230) gives strong reasons to think that "our current global institutions" do not pass the test. Yet he is more focused on acceptability and theoretical vices of the current mainstream political theories supporting the failing institutions (Ibid., pp. 230–244, p. 246 n. 15; Gardiner, 2011c). I take the global test seriously as a transitional principle with a purpose to help in building ethical agencies for climate transitions (rather than only as a critique of the mainstream theories).

Political legitimacy is a complex and disputed concept. It has gained extensive attention both in social sciences (e.g. Beetham, 1991) and liberal political philosophy (see Peter, 2017). I will not try to give a proper overview here. Instead, in Section 3.2 I focus on what I call the two main normative elements of political legitimacy, voluntarism and substantivism. I argue that it initially makes good sense to think that the global test is an articulation of a condition of political legitimacy amid the climate threats. Yet this interpretation exposes an ambiguous tension of the global test: to what extent its normative power is derived from specific consensual institutional relations (i.e., voluntarism) and to what extent from externally credible ethical principles (i.e., substantivism). Also, I suggest that Gardiner's ideas on the normative grounds of the global test, the humanity's perspective and the delegation argument, seem to assume the moral corruption diagnosis. This subjects them to wishful thinking. These ambiguities make it hard to assess the global test as a concessive transitional principle, that is, what kind of concessions are made in it and how they promise to help with ethical agency-building.

To disambiguate the global test and to make it more promising as a transitional principle, in Section 3.3 I offer two alternative interpretations that emphasize different aspects of Gardiner's account and depart from it to different directions. Both interpretations combine elements of voluntarism and substantivism. I point out how these combinations and other features of the interpretations make them different yet initially promising examples of concessive transitional principles.

The political realist interpretation is discussed in Sub-section 3.3.1. It emphasizes Gardiner's ideas that the test is about an existential security threat and that it sets a strict but narrow condition for legitimacy of basic institutions. It also takes further the voluntarist idea that legitimate institutions need to be justified to their subjects. For political realists, this justification must be based on reasons that the subjects actually have in the given context. Sub-section 3.3.2 discusses the interpretation inspired by Allen Buchanan's understanding of political legitimacy and ideal/non-ideal theory. It takes up Gardiner's idea that political legitimacy is based on substantive ethical norms. Yet the normative basis of the Buchanian account is markedly different from that of Gardiner. It is based primarily on equal protection of the most basic interests of all, and secondarily on protection of the most basic human rights. At a first glance the Buchanian interpretation seems like an example of strictly non-concessive substantivism inappropriate for transition ethics. Yet I argue that it truly is a concessive account that sets a promising example for transition ethics.

Section 3.4 concludes the chapter. It argues that the Buchanian interpretation might be a more appropriate benchmark of transitional principles in concessive transition ethics. I argue that this is not because the Buchanian global test considered in isolation would be clearly better. Rather, the Buchanian approach taken more generally seems more suitable for the action-guiding ambitions of transition ethics. I argue that if the political realist approach is more generally applied in transition ethics, it is hampered by theoretical vices rooted in its suspicion to all positive ethical demands and the detached and relativized "second-order" perspective on politics it evokes. The Buchanian approach fares better in avoiding the vices because it sets limits to modesty and provides a more useful articulation of flexibility by taking a clear and perhaps controversial ethical stand. Yet political realism offers a useful limit case of concession for transition ethicists. It also reminds them of some lasting compromises and difficulties of transition ethics that should not be wished away: the importance of audience- and context-sensitivity for effectiveness, the necessity of political partisanship and the lasting uncertainty amid the perfect moral storm.

3.1 The global test and the perspective of humanity

In this section I present the global test in the context of Gardiner's transition ethics and political thought. I clarify the claim that the global test is a transitional principle directly connected to the agency-constructing task, though Gardiner is not himself drawing this connection that strongly. The section also explicates and interprets the kind of moral agency or situation that is assumed in the test and that is the foundation of its normativity: the perspective of humanity.

I start with brief general remarks on Gardiner's political thought (see also 2.3.2). He thinks – despite the misleading title of “climate ethics” – that both the climate problem and its potential solutions must be political and, especially, institutional. As is explained in the previous chapters, Gardiner thinks that the main problem in building motivated agency for climate transitions is moral corruption, which is significantly caused by an institutional “grasping problem”. Therefore, the challenge of transition ethics is primarily not how to fundamentally change the too self-occupied consumers for the better, but rather how “to find a way to unleash other concerns we already have” (Gardiner, 2014, p. 303). The best way to do this is to mobilize the morally corrupt yet ethically decent people to overhaul their institutions that drive the narrow-mindedness on the climate catastrophe.

I suggest that the minimal global test can be understood as a transitional principle that creates an opening for the institutional overhaul simply by showing people why they should reject their current dominant institutions. The test arises when these five conditions hold: 1) human life is facing a serious, planetary level threat, which 2) is caused by human activities, and 3) would be preventable by changing these activities, but 4) the current institutions have allowed the threat to arise, and 5) are incapable of properly dealing with it. Given the conditions, the crucial criterion is: if a social/political institution or a theory “does not respect the claim that failure to address a serious global threat is a criticism of it, and a potentially fatal one, then it is inadequate and must be rejected.” (Ibid., pp. 217–218).

Here one might ask why the fact of incapability is not already enough for rejection rather than lack of respect for the claim, in other words, the demand that “the system must acknowledge and seek to address the criticism” (Ibid., p. 246 n. 14). Gardiner is not explicit on the matter, but I can think of two related reasons. Firstly, it may be

granted that anthropogenic planetary threats (including the climate crisis) are difficult to tackle – if not technically then at least politically. It may not only be the case that all the current major institutions are incapable but also that nobody knows what kind of institutions *exactly* would solve the problem (i.e., the theoretical storm). Therefore, we are not necessarily in a position to demand institutions that have ready solutions, but that they would be willing to take the threats seriously. Secondly, focus on respecting the claim allows one to judge institutions right now despite the uncertainties about their future performance. If the global test would be about performance only, and given the uncertainties about the future, then institutions could be ultimately judged unacceptable only after the fact. This is proper for neither transition ethics nor climate politics. What is wanted amid uncertainty and the serious climate crisis are institutions that have the best approach or “attitude”. They are the best chance in dealing with the threat. Therefore, Gardiner argues that different forms of complacency, obliviousness and opaqueness about the climate crisis and the global test make institutions and their supporting theories unacceptable.

An intuitive clarifying pair of question about the global test is why is it “minimal” and why is it “global”. Yet let us start with some more general points about the nature of the test. The global test is a “condition of adequacy” (Ibid., p. 233) of institutions or “a constraint on their acceptability” (Ibid., p. 218). It sets a strict condition because it is about a serious, planetary level threat. In the case of climate crisis (the global test can be evoked by other threats too, say, the sixth mass extinction), Gardiner argues that global climate destabilization poses an especially serious issue of security³⁰ (Ibid., p. 220), which, though he does not use the term, could be characterized as existential. I do not necessarily mean “existential” in the narrow sense that humanity as a species risks extinction due to the climate catastrophe. Rather, I mean that the catastrophe threatens to cause system scale havoc that undermines the ecological, material and physical foundations of the current civilization (i.e., existential in the sense of “pertaining to the conditions of existence”). Therefore, the climate crisis is not just a normal political

³⁰ See (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 220–230) for a detailed argument why the climate crisis is such a security issue that brings on the test, and why it seems “initially plausible” that the current system is failing the test.

problem among others (Ibid., p. 214) but a threat to the conditions of politics and societal co-living as we currently know them.³¹

Why, then, is the test global and minimal? One way to explain the attributes is in terms of a foundational shared moral agency of all humans in light of the basic facts of our common situation (Gardiner, 2017a, pp. 33–34) that is the ethical basis of the test. Gardiner calls the agency or the situation “the perspective [of humanity]” (Gardiner, 2011b) or “Humanity’s challenge”³² (Gardiner, 2011a; 2012) (shortly hereafter “the perspective” or “the challenge”). One of Gardiner’s characterizations of the perspective is that we, as humans, are evolutionarily speaking a young species on a planet that is the only viable home to us and many other living entities. Recently, however, we have attained power and influence over the life-supporting systems of the planet. According to Gardiner (2011c, p. 127–128), these facts pose normative questions (how are we to act and understand ourselves?) that are fundamental (also but not only) to our politics in a sense that answers to them “frame and limit” answers that can be given to other questions. The global test is, then, a focused and negative criterion derived from the perspective (Ibid.). It is focused on institutional relations between humans. It aims to negatively rule out institutions that have unacceptable answers to the fundamental normative questions raised by the Humanity’s challenge, or, more correctly, do not properly pay heed to the challenge.

The perspective arguably makes the global test minimal in the sense that it is based on “fairly weak and widely shared ethical intuitions” (Gardiner, 2012, p. 246; see 2011a, p. 219), which are derived from the basic facts of our evolutionary situation. In another sense, negativity of the test makes it minimal: it only tells what to reject, not what to accept. The perspective also invites a global view on humanity as a whole (or even as a species, as the evolutionary framing suggests). Hence it is global. Accordingly, the main target institutions of the test are those that organize our political life on the highest level of the “global system” (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 228–230), i.e., the international system and the global markets.

³¹ Gardiner (2011a, p. 246 n. 13) interestingly takes the term “a global test” from the 2004 presidential election debates in the US, where John Kerry used it to criticize George W. Bush’s foreign policy. The important point maintained from the original political use of the term is “that the security of any state is dependent to some extent on the security of the global system of which it is part”. This also helps to see the connection between the global and the existential security elements of the test.

³² Sometimes also “a basic evolutionary challenge” (Gardiner, 2012) or, convolutedly and taking a more focused perspective, “the ‘we’re in this together (as agents)’ view” (Gardiner, 2017a).

Now, as in the case of the moral corruption diagnosis, it is good to start by noting that the global test operates on a specific “high level of abstraction” (Gardiner, 2011a, p. 219) pertaining (among other things) to moral agency prevalent in the North. Gardiner (2017a, pp. 33–34) admits that “looked at conventionally, our existing agency is structured through countless historical and current social practices, and these limit our actions in various complex ways.” Even though idealization as such is not an issue, transition ethicists should be able to motivate their idealizations in terms of the overall action-guiding ambitions at hand. Gardiner’s (2011a, p. 219) motivation for the “extremely abstract terms” of the global test is that in some cases it still “retains some intuitive bite” to almost all, and presumably the climate crisis is such a case. In other words, “the basic situation remains” (Ibid.). Namely, despite our differences, we all inhabit the shared global and evolutionary situation as human beings, and our inadequate institutions are resting on our continued acceptance of them (Ibid.). So, all other differences of our agencies, institutions and societies can be abstracted away in the test.

From a more practical perspective of action-guidance one can point out that even granting the scientific or ethical soundness of the global test does not yet mean that it resonates with people as they are in the North, situated in their historically and spatially specific institutions and practices. Yet, importantly, I understand Gardiner’s claim that the perspective is “widely shared” to entail, at least to an extent, that the test offers for many (if not most) agents in the North at least potentially *motivating* ethical reasons to reject and overhaul their institutions. Therefore, the global test presumably is not derived only from “external” moral or scientific truths imposed on people. Also, it is minimal not only in terms of the views of the minuscule and hyperspecific group of professional philosophers. The test purports to offer a ground for ethical transitional motivation, though it could be that people are disengaged due to, say, moral corruption and institutional incentives. In other words, the test may be thought as transitional principle, and a very central one given the goal of motivating institutional overhaul.

3.2 The global test and political legitimacy: ambiguity of Gardiner's position

I suggest that the global test should be understood as an argument about political legitimacy. This helps to see the two normative grounds of the test discernible in Gardiner's discussion. The grounds are the two general and contrasting normative approaches to political legitimacy³³, voluntarism and substantivism (Rossi, 2013, pp. 560–561; 2014, p. 10–11). I argue in this section that even though it initially makes good sense to think that the global test is an articulation of a condition of political legitimacy amid the climate threats, trying to pinpoint the exact normative status of the test based on Gardiner's writings is difficult. That is, there is ambiguity to the global test: to what extent its normativity is derived from specific consensual relations of institutional power (i.e., voluntarism) and to what extent from externally credible ethical principles (i.e., substantivism). Furthermore, Gardiner's ideas on the normative grounds of the test seem to be problematically dependent on the moral corruption diagnosis subject to wishful thinking.

First it needs to be said what political legitimacy is about in general, and how the global test can be interpreted in its terms. The general association of political legitimacy and the global test is quite straightforward. A brief explication of the former suffices to show this. Horton's (2012, p. 130, original emphasis) take on the matter is representative enough for my purposes: an account of political legitimacy should "explain how is that a state³⁴ has - - the *authority* to govern those who are subject to it." From the perspective of its subjects, the state's political legitimacy gives a powerful, though not always decisive, *reason for complying* with its foundational political institutions, practices and procedures, often despite the subjects' likely discontentment about more specific issues (Ibid., p. 135). So, generalizing a bit, political legitimacy is about *justification* of political authority or coercive power³⁵ of an agent or an institution,

³³ It is good to keep in mind that there are purely descriptive accounts of political legitimacy used in social sciences to explain, e.g., stability of states (see Peter, 2017; Beetham, 1991).

³⁴ Theories of political legitimacy often take the contemporary state system by default or at least as an unavoidable (i.e., concessive) starting point. This does not imply that political legitimacy necessitates the contemporary state (see Buchanan, 2003, p. 53–55).

³⁵ Peter (2017) distinguishes political legitimacy as justification of authority or of coercive power and legitimation (process) and legitimacy (outcome). I omit the details here.

though theorists have very different ideas on what this justification takes (Erman & Möller, 2015a, p. 217; Peter, 2017).

Now we can see why the global test, as a condition of adequacy and acceptability of our institutions, is readily understood to be about political legitimacy. If an institution fails the test, we will (or should) reject its authority and coercive power upon us, since it cannot guarantee stable and safe life on this planet. In other words, institutions failing the global test are illegitimate. It is good to note that even though an institution fails the test and is thus illegitimate, its subjects could still comply. Political legitimacy is not the only, and historically perhaps not that common (Sagar, 2018, p. 127), way to keep-up order. Compliance can be secured, though not so stably perhaps, with naked coercion involving violence, sanctions and incentives (Beetham, 1991, p. 28) and with propaganda, delusion and manipulation (Sagar, 2018). Compliance to illegitimate institutions can be also explained, like Gardiner does, in terms of ethical vulnerabilities that are partly caused by the illegitimate institutions themselves, like moral corruption.

Furthermore, Gardiner (2011a, p. 218) points out that the global test is not the only, or always even the most important, consideration about acceptability of institutions. The test should not be understood as a full account of political legitimacy but rather as a focused condition of it applying in the era of the anthropogenic planetary threats (i.e., if you will, though Gardiner does not use the term, the Anthropocene). Yet, the global test may have crucial action-guiding and -orienting potentials when connected to political legitimacy and applied in the climate crisis. It prescribes a criterion of political legitimacy and makes the case that the current institutions are illegitimate. It also orients people to consider the point and purpose of the seemingly fixed political and economic institutions in the Anthropocene, and especially their own agency in reproducing and overhauling them. In other words, the test could be a key step in ethical climate transitions.

Though the initial connection is straightforward, the rich debate on the normative grounds of political legitimacy helps to see the ambiguities of the test. It is perhaps better to call voluntarism and substantivism as the two main normative elements of political legitimacy, since many current accounts are hybrids of voluntarism and substantivism (Rossi, 2014). Gardiner does not explicitly mention political legitimacy when discussing the global test. Nevertheless, his (to my knowledge) only explicit (yet

brief) discussion on political legitimacy³⁶ evokes both voluntarism and substantivism. Gardiner (2011a, pp. 362, my emphasis) gives two conditions of political legitimacy of institutions: they should be “*justified to those who are subject to them*”, and the justification should invoke “*appropriate norms of justice and community*”. The former is a voluntarist condition, while the latter is an example of substantivism. Next, I elaborate the two normative elements and their connection Gardiner’s ideas

Pure substantivism defines political legitimacy exclusively in terms of some substantive normative criteria and principles (Rossi, 2013, pp. 560–561). These criteria could be based on moral principles (e.g., justice) or naturalistic facts about human beings and conditions of their co-existence (Ibid.; Sangiovanni, 2008). The important point is that in substantivism political legitimacy of an institution is independent of the actual, hypothetical or potential recognition of the institutions by its subjects. People could of course recognize the institutions. Yet in substantivism that contingent fact is irrelevant for political legitimacy. So, in Gardiner’s terms, the normative power of substantivist legitimacy is derived exclusively from the ethical credibility of “appropriate norms”.

In stark opposition, pure voluntarism takes consent, agreement or recognition of subjects of a political entity as the basis of political legitimacy (Rossi, 2013, pp. 560–561). In pure voluntarism, exemplified by the so-called consent theories, only the unenforced, literal *act* of consent of all subjects of power matters (a well-known current advocate is A.J. Simmons, see Horton, 2012, pp. 136–141). That is, reasons subjects have or could have for their consent are irrelevant, even though they would be morally objectionable.

Still, (even pure) voluntarism is not ethically void: it champions the idea that the consensual relations (acceptance, agreement, recognition etc.) between agents exercising political power and those subjected to that power are, for one reason or another, ethically valuable or humanly needed. For example, in the liberal tradition of political legitimacy going back to Locke, consent of subjects of power is demanded because it can guarantee freedom, equality and autonomy of individuals (Enoch, 2015;

³⁶ The discussion is about “the stalking horse argument” against geoengineering, i.e., in a word, geoengineering cannot be used *despite* political climate transition inertia, since geoengineering and the institutions of its application must legitimate themselves in the very same circumstances of inertia (Gardiner, 2011a, pp. 361–363). I focus only on the ideas on political legitimacy in the argument.

Rossi, 2014). More generally speaking, voluntarism rests on relational normativity, while substantivism on non-relational (Rossi, 2014, pp. 10–11).

More popular recent theories in the voluntarist family understand “consent of all” in a more indirect sense, usually achieved by means of idealization or hypothesis (Enoch, 2015). This is also where Gardiner’s phrase “justified to” connects to (see *Ibid.*, p. 116); the focus is no longer primarily on the fleeting consensual acts, but on (an interpretation of) the reasons of the subjects (partly, potentially or counterfactually) constituting those acts (see 3.3.1 below). Of course, various interpretations have been given to the justified-to condition. Also, some have argued that hypothetical voluntarist³⁷ theories are only pseudo-voluntaristic, since “theoretical constructions” about, say, reasonability, do the normative work in them rather than real consent (Horton, 2012, pp. 133-135). Alternatively, hypothetical consent accounts may be understood as efforts to combine elements of voluntarism and substantivism (Rossi, 2014).

It needs to be clarified that the distinction of voluntarism and substantivism is not equivalent to the distinction of concession and non-concession. There are strictly non-concessive versions of both voluntarism and substantivism. Pure substantivist legitimacy involves no concession from the ethical demands. Voluntarist consent theories are also non-concessive: practically no current (or perhaps even future) political community can achieve the demand of consent of all (Horton, 2012, p. 138–140; Buchanan, 2002, pp. 699–700; Enoch, 2015, pp. 117–118). Yet less strict versions of both theory types may bring in concessive considerations like the condition that political legitimacy should not be completely inaccessible for the political powers as we know them. The important point here is that a theory being concessive is not dependent on it being either voluntarist or substantivist. Concessive character of an account of political legitimacy should be assessed case by case, as I will do below with the political realist and the Buchananian interpretation of the global test.

Though Gardiner evokes both substantivist and voluntarist elements in his discussion on political legitimacy, their relation is left ambiguous. He is clearly not strict about substantivist appropriate norms: he specifies that there is no assumption “about how robust those norms must be”, allowing many alternative specifications of their content

³⁷ I use the phrase “hypothetical voluntarism” to cover all indirect versions of voluntarism, since it is more familiar in the literature, though “indirect voluntarism” would be perhaps more inclusive a term.

(Gardiner, 2011a, p. 396 n. 52). Also, the fact that seems to make an institution illegitimate is the resistance of its subjects to norms it invokes (Ibid., p. 363), implying voluntarism. However, Gardiner is apparently not forgoing substantivism, ending the argument by saying that “geoengineering is likely to be illegitimate, because it violates norms of justice and community” (Ibid.). I argue that the relation of substantivist and voluntarist elements is similarly ambiguous in the case of the global test. Again, some things point towards substantivism. For instance, Gardiner (2012, pp. 247–248, my emphasis) says that failing the test raises questions about “*philosophical* limitations and justification” of our institutions. Yet he assumes that the test is based on widely shared ethical intuitions. The claim seems to be that many people in the North see (or can be made to see) their ethical situation in the way described by the perspective of humanity, and thus the test could help in building their motivation.

The ambiguity is perhaps most salient when Gardiner (2012) considers the self-raised “grandiosity objection” to the perspective of humanity³⁸, the ethical basis of the global test. The objection consists of two remarkably different complaints. The first one is called “the unity complaint”. Essentially, it denies the fact that the perspective is widely shared. In fact, it is “an evaluative perspective that many do not accept, and some would actively resist”. Many people are not cosmopolites. They do not feel the primary attachment to humanity as a whole but to their localities, kin, nations and so on. To add, many people do not recognize the naturalist and evolutionary worldview of the perspective, or even might see it as disgraceful, scientist and sacrilegious. The second complaint is about “the absence of power”, namely, how can people who lack proper political power (most of us?) be implicated in the failure of whole humanity. (Gardiner, 2012, pp. 252–254).

The unity complaint is based on purported empirical facts about popular attitudes, which only become normatively relevant, if the perspective rests at least partly on voluntarist normativity. So, one may expect that Gardiner’s answer to the grandiosity objection clarifies the normative status of the perspective and, accordingly, the global test. Unfortunately, I argue this is not the case. Here Gardiner evokes an argument called “the delegated responsibility model” (Ibid.)³⁹. Crudely put, it is an account of

³⁸ In this context Gardiner discusses responsibility instead of the global test. Nevertheless, the relevant questions on the normative grounds of the perspective arise.

³⁹ It is perhaps the most repeated argument of his political philosophy (see Gardiner, 2011b, pp. 53–55; 2011a, pp. 431–434; 2013, pp. 103–106; 2017a; 2017b, p. 451).

collective responsibility for climate transitions that bridges individual and political level responsibilities. The idea is that political institutions usually operate based on responsibilities that individuals have delegated to them to solve collective problems. But if the institutions fail to deal with the problems they are supposed to deal with and are incapable of self-correction, then, to that extent, the responsibilities fall back to the individuals. Amid the climate crisis, the current institutions have failed to solve the problem, and there are strong reasons to think that they are also incapable. Therefore, Gardiner (2017a) argues, we have “together as agents” the collective responsibility to create new institutions that can solve the problem.

I am not going into the details of the delegation model (see Gardiner, 2017a). The interesting point here is that the argument seems to involve some form of hypothetical voluntarism (see *Ibid.*, pp. 35-42). It is a relation-based idea on the justification of political institutions, where the *acts* of delegation are needed to constitute political legitimacy. Of course, many would probably deny that they have ever delegated anything to anyone. But Gardiner offers elaborate explanations how the fact that the model feels unfamiliar and refutable to many just proves that it efficiently structures our societies and attitudes (*Ibid.*). Indeed, moral corruption explains why people disengage from their delegated responsibilities falling back on them after their institutions fail the test. Perhaps, the idea is that were they in their right mind (i.e., idealized and non-corrupt versions of themselves), people would recognize their responsibilities. It seems that Gardiner’s answer to the grandiosity objection focuses on the absence of power complaint. Perhaps many of those who appeal to their lack of power are susceptible to moral corruption: they do get the stakes of the challenge but are trying to rationalize away their share of the collective responsibility.

However, I think that Gardiner’s hypothetical voluntarism is not a satisfying answer to the more radical challenge of the unity complaint, that is, many people may profoundly lack the perspective of humanity. There is the separate question can the delegation model as such make sense to the targeted people or, even if they recognize it somehow implicitly, can it be used as a motivating tool in transition ethics. Yet more profoundly, even if people do recognize the delegation model, it does not yet show that they habit the perspective of humanity. The unity complaint remains untouched by Gardiner’s rejoinder: it cannot be assumed without further (empirical) evidence that enough agents – or even an idealized version of them – see that planetary threats of the climate crisis

make their local institutions illegitimate. For instance, people who do not habit the perspective of humanity might think that the Finnish government should first and foremost protect its own citizens. Even though they might note the risks of climate change in this respect, they still might have internal reasons to regard the government acceptable since it is doing decent job with other priorities, like curbing pandemics and upholding a democratic *Rechtsstaat*. Even idealization cannot credibly make something out of nothing.

Indeed, Gardiner seems to recognize the challenge as he notes that people could well also deny the delegation model as “utterly ‘unworldly’” (Gardiner, 2012, p. 253). Yet, at this point he seems to confusingly retreat from hypothetical voluntarism to substantivism. Gardiner (Ibid.) not only argues that the complaint ignores the fact that the delegation model is “standard and traditional one in mainstream political theory”. He also concludes that the possible lack of cosmopolitan unity of humankind does not “undermine the ethical claim” that it should exist (Ibid., p. 254). He once also notes in a different context that the perspective of humanity “provide[s] some insight into the values of passionate environmentalists” (Gardiner, 2011b, pp. 56–57). This implies that even though the environmentalist values are not (yet?) shared widely enough, they still articulate the right substantivist reasons to dismiss the institutions failing with the climate crisis.

To sum up, Gardiner’s ideas on the normative bearings of the global test are unsatisfying for two reasons. Firstly, the delegation argument and the kind of hypothetical voluntarism it evokes may eventually repeat the vice of wishful thinking discussed in Chapter 2. Gardiner may selectively focus on the absence of power complaint and moral corruption it involves since if it is the main problem, then the ethical accounts of humanity’s perspective and delegated responsibility have a chance of being motivationally effectual. This is how Gardiner can retain the promise of practicability and motivational effectiveness without making any concessions from the global test or perspective of humanity. Considering this charge fully calls for empirical assessment of the complaints and the ethical worldviews that could inhabit them. I will not do that here. Yet since Chapter 2 shows that the moral corruption diagnosis as such evokes a considerable risk of wishful thinking, the alternative interpretations of the global test I sketch in the next section should not depend on the diagnosis.

Secondly, the alternative interpretations are called-for since Gardiner's ideas on the normative bearings of the global test and humanity's perspective are ambiguous. Rather than articulating a coherent combination of voluntarism and substantivism, he vacillates between hypothetical voluntarism and straightforward substantivism. Importantly, this confusion makes it hard to assess the global test as a concessive transitional principle: what (non-)concession are made in it and how should they help with the goal of agency-building? The next section introduces two ideas how to complement, extend and disambiguate the global test.

3.3 Alternative interpretations of the global test

This section presents the two alternative interpretations of the global test in terms of political legitimacy. They emphasize different aspects of Gardiner's account and depart from it to different directions. Both interpretations combine elements of voluntarism and substantivism, and I argue that they make the normative grounds of the global test less ambiguous. I point out how these combinations and other features of the interpretations make them different yet promising examples of concessive transitional principles. They also seem independent-enough from the moral corruption diagnosis to avoid an instant suspicion of wishful thinking.

Sub-section 3.3.1 presents the political realist interpretation. Sub-section 3.3.2 discusses the Buchanian account. My point is that though both accounts are concessive, they are concessive in markedly different degrees and ways. The political realist interpretation is rather extensively concessive, at least in a sense that external normative principles have only a minimal role in the account. The Buchanian account has a clear non-concessive ethical core, though contextual considerations of accessibility are central in it.

3.3.1 Political realist interpretation

To construct the interpretation, I put together ideas from the contributions of theorists that have been associated with political realism, e.g., Bernard Williams, John Horton, Andrea Sangiovanni and David Beetham⁴⁰. The promising features of political realist

⁴⁰ The synthesis is done with transition ethics in mind, so it is unavoidable that I do injustice to the nuances and differences of the different political realist accounts.

legitimacy for concessive transition ethics are context-sensitivity and empirical relevance since they may enhance practicability of the account. Before describing these, it is good to spell out the general association between the global test and political realist legitimacy. I suggest that an important shared feature is acuteness and priority that Gardiner expresses in saying that the climate crisis is not just a normal political problem among others. Political realists think similarly about the issues of political legitimacy in general. For them, political legitimacy orders and prioritizes normative considerations within the political sphere, which is not perhaps well captured by the general definition of legitimacy as “justification of political authority”. Political realist legitimacy is importantly about provision of some urgent political goods that act as a pre-condition for all other social pursuits (Sangiovanni, 2008, pp. 157–158).

The idea is best expressed by Bernard Williams’ (2005, pp. 3–4) characterization of the “‘first’ political question” of “securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation” as the necessary but insufficient and “under-determined” (Hall, 2013, p. 235) condition of political legitimacy. If a power wants to retain its political legitimacy, the first question must be solved all the time, even though it often is not the explicit topic of everyday politics. The question is ‘first’ with inverted commas: it can never be solved once and for all (Williams, 2005, pp. 3–4). Not only are the acceptable solutions to it always context-dependent and contestable (e.g. what kind of risks are *we* willing to take?), but also circumstances might change to (re-)politicize the question. Despite the indeterminacy, solving the first question in one way or another is the condition of all ethical ways of living together, at least in the circumstances of ineradicable moral disagreement that political realists often take as a given (Sleat, 2014, p. 322).

So, the political realist interpretation is that the global test is an account of what (among other things) the first question of political legitimacy of our institutions entails when we are facing planetary threats of our own making, like the climate crisis. Initially, the global test and the first question account seem to fit together. The interpretation captures that the test is about necessary solutions to existential security issues, and that these solutions frame and limit answers to other ethicopolitical questions of living together. It can be even argued that political realist legitimacy allows a restricted sense of “globality” for the test. Despite their indeterminate nature, the necessary questions of political realist legitimacy are context-transcending (Estlund, 2017, pp. 396–397) or –

as Beetham (1991, pp. 21–22) puts it – they form the universal “normative structure of legitimacy”. That is, in so far as there are claims to justified political authority, and not just naked violence and terror, the first question must be answered in a way that “makes sense” to the subjects expected to obey (Williams, 2005, pp. 5, 10–11).

Yet, importantly, the structure itself is insufficient for political legitimacy, since there are many ways to provide basic order, safety and trust; the thin structure must be “filled” somehow. Gardiner thinks similarly that the test is focused and insufficient. Yet here the key factor setting Gardiner and political realists apart becomes salient, namely, the explicit skepticism and emphasis of ethical plurality and profound disagreement of the latter (see Hall & Sleat, 2017; Williams, 2005, pp. 10–11). For political realists, “the filler” for the universal structure of legitimacy are the contextual criteria recognized by the subjects of the authority (Wendt, 2016). These include the varied moral, self-interested, prudential, cultural, social, interpretative etc. reasons that affect subjects’ fundamental normative expectations about their political rule (Williams, 2005, p. 11).

Explaining how political realist legitimacy combines elements of voluntarism and substantivism clarifies this point. Political realists do not agree with the consent theories that acts of consent bring political legitimacy. Instead, some of them, like Williams (see 2005, p. 4), explicitly use the hypothetical voluntarist language of “justified to”. More accurately, political authority is justified *in terms of* reasons and beliefs of its subjects (Beetham, 1991, p. 13; Horton, 2012, p. 141; Sleat, 2014, pp. 326–327). This move changes the focus from acts or psychological states of the subjects to congruence of their normative expectations about political power and the qualities of the system of power they are subjected to. When assessing political legitimacy of a state, one should not just carry on an opinion poll (Beetham, 1991, p. 13; Horton, 2012, p. 141). One should *judge* how well the state meets the criteria (or the most important of them) the subjects have, and their shared public political culture contains. People believe in “or more properly recognize or acknowledge, the state as legitimate, because it meets the salient criteria of legitimacy that are practically operative” (Horton, 2012, p. 142); the fact of political legitimacy causes consent, not the other way around.

So, political realist legitimacy focuses on reasons for accepting political authority, and not on acts of acceptance. Yet the main source of the reasons is not moral or scientific facts as in pure substantivism, but the contextual attitudes of the subjects and the

features of their political system. The first question seems to be an exception to this rule since it is a universal condition. Yet it is notable how thin, indeterminate and limited the first question is, only an articulation of the necessary challenges a power needs to solve to become politically legitimate.

A plausible interpretation of the first question is that it is based on the practically universal human fear of “radical disadvantage” in terms of “coercion, pain, torture, humiliation, suffering, death” (Williams, 2005, pp. 4–5). An institution cannot have political authority on individuals that it is expected to protect but who still face radical disadvantage either due to acts or omissions of those in power (consider the case of racist police violence in the US and elsewhere and the slogan “No justice, no peace” used to back civil disobedience in protests). Therefore, the first question is abstracted from the actual reasons of the subject of power. It tries to describe horrors that make political authorities lose their legitimacy if they cannot protect their purported subjects from them. It seems to rest on non-concessive ethics, perhaps based on some implicit ideas on “human nature” – what are the things that no one wants. The non-concessive ethics in the political realist account is very minimal and modest – even overtly so, as is argued below.

Despite the non-concessive first question, or because of its vagueness and thinness, the question on normative vacuity (or undue ethical relativism, see Erman & Möller, 2018) of political realist legitimacy arises readily: the reasons that the subjects have could be “morally not just flawed but heinous” (Estlund, 2017, p. 397). I do not pretend to provide a proper answer to this profound issue (which may ultimately come down to metaethical questions on universal morality). Yet it is good to emphasize that political realist legitimacy centrally relies on voluntarist relational normativity, which shows that emphasizing contextual reasons of subjects is not *only* a matter of making a theory more practicable.

Political realists express the value of the relations political legitimacy in varied ways (see Cozzaglio, 2020, p. 13; Cross, 2019, p. 378; Greene, 2019, p. 78; Horton, 2012, p. 138; Williams, 2005, p. 10), but perhaps Andrea Sangiovanni’s (2008) “institutionalist” wording is most pertinent here. He argues that some existing institutions might be normatively important networks of relations, since, at best, they record “the results of cooperation in conditions of fundamental political conflict and disagreement” (Ibid., p.

156). Some institutions are examples of success “in surmounting the potential for violent conflict, in establishing a framework for further cooperation, and in creating political forms within which each party is better to realize their interests and aims” (Ibid., pp. 158–159). That is, some institutions are examples politically legitimate networks of mutually recognized relations, which secure necessities of human life and make many other valuable things attainable. Importantly, these kinds of institutions are far from self-evident in our world. Also, as many hypothetical voluntarists do (Enoch 2015, pp. 138–140; Rossi 2014, pp. 19, 21), political realist legitimacy seems to in part rely on (often rather unspecified) value of autonomy in the face of ethical uncertainty, disagreement and precariousness of the world. As Williams (2005, p. 10) puts it, political realists value “the human capacity to live under an intelligible order of authority”.

So, emphasis of disagreement, plurality and context-sensitivity of political realist legitimacy does not entail that everything that subjects happen to believe is legitimate actually is legitimate. Were this true, political realism would be an example of “complacent realism”, a theory that concedes all normative principles and thus ceases to be a normative theory altogether (Estlund 2014, p. 115). Indeed, political realist legitimacy is distinct from the descriptive accounts of political legitimacy that have been popular, at least historically, in social sciences (Peter, 2017). Yet I argue that political realists do not detach normative political legitimacy from purported empirical explanatory power of the descriptive concept. Political legitimacy is, hypothetically, not only positively connected to longevity and resilience of political orders (and illegitimacy to their erosion), but also to effectiveness of power to achieve goals other than conservative self-reproduction (Beetham, 1991, pp. 28, 33). Political realists want the fact that a state is judged (il)legitimate to have some, no matter how indeterminate and potential, real-world relevance, at least in the sense of pointing towards opportunities of action. Empirical relevance and context-sensitivity are tightly connected in the political realist account – the one is not without the other. Together the two features also account for the concessive action-guidance potentials of political realist legitimacy. Effectiveness, accessibility, likelihood and political possibility arguably follow from the fact that political realist legitimacy is attached to the real reasons of the subjects. Though the political realist global test is based on the non-

concessive part of the account, the first question, the claim is that failing the test should be so obviously bad that, ideally, no one should think a failing institution legitimate.

Why, then, should one think that understanding the global test as a focused articulation of the first question is a promising example of a transitional principle? The reason is that the political realist reading ushers transition ethicists to start interactively from the unity complaint and other similar diagnostic considerations about the actual reasons of the subjects and the purposes of their acknowledged institutions (if any exist), before it makes judgements about political legitimacy, or the combinations of moral agencies, political responsibilities and worldviews it could be based on in the context. The political realist reading would not privilege the humanity's perspective or the delegation model before any empirical or interpretative evidence on their importance in a specific location. So, from Gardiner's perspective, the interpretation may ask for concessions. Yet it helps to disambiguate Gardiner's position by radically circumscribing the substantivist elements of the ambiguous tension.

Political realist legitimacy is not flexible when it comes to allowing different degrees of (non-)concession. Context-sensitivity gives the account malleability, but political realists are not to advocate non-concessive ethical principles (except ones derived from the first question). In other words, the political realist interpretation is very modest in relation to non-concessive ethics. However, the political realist test is not ethically void. It also might retain potentially "global" reach in narrower sense as an articulation of the self-caused existential security threat of the climate catastrophe. The test could act as a kind of umbrella argument stating a severe challenge for all major political institutions, which is complemented in each context with the relevant local normative materials. This promises to provide practicable criteria of (il)legitimacy for concessive transition ethics that can resonate with the agents that must be mobilized for climate transitions. Indeed, some political realists seem to assume that their theories are more effectively action-orienting than some mainstream alternatives (Ulaş 2020; Mckean 2016; cf. Horton 2018 p. 2, Freedman 2013).

3.3.2 Buchanian interpretation

At the first glance Allen Buchanan's (2002) "justice-based" political legitimacy seems to be a prime example of strictly non-concessive substantivism. Buchanan argues that

political entity is legitimate if and only if it is “morally justified”, i.e., it is credibly and consistently able to ensure the protection of “at least the most basic human rights of all those over whom it wields power” (Ibid., p. 703). This condition is based on a duty of justice, namely, “moral obligation to help ensure that all persons have access to institutions that protect their basic human rights” (Ibid.). The basic human rights are based on “basic human interests” of central moral importance (Ibid., p. 705). So, the Buchanian legitimacy seems to rest on arguably credible justifying reasons build upon a moralized account on some basic naturalistic facts about humans.

Instead of the humanity’s perspective and the delegation model, the Buchanian interpretation connects the test to the moral foundation of the basic human rights. The ultimate reason why failure to deal with the existential security threat of climate catastrophe makes our institutions illegitimate is that they will, consequently, fail to protect the basic human rights (or, better, they allow destabilization of the conditions of possibility of right protection). It seems that not only is this account certainly less modest than the political realist interpretation, but one may hesitate that it is also too “bold” for transition ethics for two reasons. Firstly, it goes against “minimalism” of transition ethics (see 1.2.2). The Buchanian account too readily takes a contestable ethical stance, which is immodest in the circumstances of profound theoretical uncertainty characterizing the domain of transition ethics. Secondly, it would mean that the global test would resonate with the motivating reasons of the agents transition ethics tries to get moving by chance only. The Buchanian alternative is apparently unashamedly non-concessive and substantivist. There seems to be no room for the specific purposes of institutions or the internal perspectives of the agents, which would make the toolbox of agency-construction rather limited. If the basic human rights do not resonate somewhere, what to do?

My purpose here is to attenuate these hesitations and show that the Buchanian interpretation of the global test is at closer reading properly modest and flexible to be an example of promising concessive transitional principle. That is, though the Buchanian account retains the non-concessive ethical backbone, it includes also relational and contextual considerations that directly connect it with the concessive considerations of practicability. This is noticed if Buchanan’s theory of political legitimacy is read in the context of his understanding of ideal/non-ideal theory formulated in *Justice, Legitimacy,*

and Self-Determination (2003). There the account of political legitimacy is related to the transitional goal of guiding the overhaul of international legal institutions.

A distinctive feature of the normative demands in this framework is that they should be “accessible”, that is, there should be “a practicable route” from here to the end state characterized by the principles (see 1.2.1). This directly brings concessive elements to the Buchananian perspective. Importantly, accessibility asks for consideration of contextual relational criteria, especially in the form of “institutional moral reasoning” (Buchanan, 2003, pp. 22–23) relatable to both Gardiner and political realists like Sangiovanni. Justification of action-guiding moral principles should not be independent of the (expected) consequences of their implementation as institutions (Ibid.).

Furthermore, theorists should “build upon” the already existing institutions and their acknowledged principles, at least if they are not morally too objectionable (Ibid., p. 63). Centrally, and in the name of accessibility, these considerations should be included to help win support of those who have most power in changing the institutions (Ibid.).

Though this is hardly as radical as the political realist reliance on the contextual reasons of the participants, it attenuates the worry that the Buchananian account is non-concessive to the point of approving motivational inertness.

Given the demand for accessibility, the most basic human rights may not be that distant and external after all – also in comparison to the political realist alternative. Indeed, the fundamental interests they protect overlap to some extent with the humanly fearsome objects of radical disadvantage propelling the first question. Buchanan’s (Ibid., p. 128) “hypothesis” is that the most basic rights include, shortly put, the rights to life, to “resources for subsistence”, to freedom of expression and association, to due process and equality before the law, to basic personal security and to bodily integrity, and rights against arbitrary violations of personal freedom, against enslavement, and against persecution and discrimination on grounds of religion, ethnicity, race, gender, or sexual preference. Political realists’ list of the key considerations of political legitimacy is admittedly more minimal and abstract. But Buchanan says that his list is only a challengeable hypothesis. The main point is that the condition of political legitimacy is “protection of those rights that are most necessary for a decent human life” (Ibid., p. 129). Thus, as in the case of the first question, it is plausible to argue that the most basic human rights are sensitive to the most general reasons and interests people (in the

abstract) have about their life, despite the exact list of rights remains contestable, partly contextual and profoundly indeterminate (see *Ibid.*, pp. 180–185).

Further elements of Buchanan’s ideal/non-ideal framework support and complement the more concessive and context-sensitive reading. Firstly, he argues that an important advantage of the most basic human rights is that they are “morally congruent”, that is, they can be defended “from a wide range of moral perspectives, secular and religious” (*Ibid.*, p. 63). These perspectives include the moral equality of persons, the human capabilities approach, utilitarianism and the worldviews of major global religions. This should attenuate the hesitation about proper minimalism of the Buchanan account. (Arguably, the most basic human rights could be even more minimal than the humanity’s perspective, which relies on a specific cosmopolitan and science-based worldview⁴¹.)

Secondly, not only is the specific content of the most basic rights somewhat open. Also, and despite the problems related to “localizations” efforts (*Ibid.*, p. 185), application of the most basic rights should be sensitive to the local context (*Ibid.*, pp. 180–181). Each locality brings its own trade-off issues between the costs of application of different basic rights, and between the basic rights and other important life projects people may have. Although the basic rights should be universally very weighty, presenting them as “absolute, exceptionless obligations that always ‘trump’ every other consideration is to indulge in caricature” (*Ibid.*, p. 26). Especially in the case of international human rights interventions, the cultural differences should be taken seriously (*Ibid.*, p. 155), and “holistic” consideration is called for (*Ibid.*, p. 180).

Finally, and maybe most importantly for transition ethics, there are also practical, political and even strategic reasons why to adopt the language of the most basic human rights for demanding protection of the fundamental interests of persons. The language itself is a historical creation with awkwardly Eurocentric roots. This poses a classic “cultural imperialism” problem of human rights (see e.g. *Ibid.*, pp. 121, 155) – though it is perhaps mitigated in the case of transition ethics that explicitly targets the North. Nevertheless, human rights have – even against the intentions of their originators (*Ibid.*, p. 58–59) and despite disillusionment on their moral or legal significance right after the

⁴¹ Gardiner (2017a, p. 34) discusses minimalism of the delegation model in terms of different views about the nature of individual responsibility. Yet, I do not know any instance where he does the same for the humanity’s perspective, though he claims it is weak and widely shared (cf. Gardiner, 2011b, pp. 56–57).

1948 Declaration (von Bernstorff, 2008) – become a powerful and salient political weapon for activists campaigning for the protection of the basic interests across the North-South divide (Buchanan, 2003, pp. 150, 153). This proliferation might be a matter of historical contingency, but Buchanan argues that it helps that the language of rights is empowering and “inherently anti-paternalistic”. It provides the agents “the standing to invoke their rights for their own protection” (Ibid., p. 150). For instance, indigenous peoples have appropriated the human rights perspective and have accordingly had a profound influence on the substance of the initially Eurocentric project (Ibid., pp. 153–154). So, instead of their moral truth or inevitable global triumph, a big reason why the most basic human rights are embraced in the Buchanian perspective is the existence of broad political movement struggling for the cause (Ibid., p. 154). As McKean (2016, p. 9) puts it, even though rhetorically and strategically human rights activists may position themselves in the world of moral universals above politics, human right claims are better “seen as contestable articulations of particular demands”, i.e., “political claims against prevailing views of legitimacy and the orientations that support them”.

The perspective of human rights has been actively discussed in the context of the climate crisis too (e.g. UNEP, 2015), though there may be difficulties to fit in it the future generations and non-human nature, two central victims of the crisis. But the crucial point here is that Buchanian political legitimacy is not necessarily fundamentally about human rights. They are advocated forthright because they arguably are at the moment not only ethically credible and versatile but also politically salient and inspiring means for the ultimate ethical objective, institutional protection of the ethically most important basic interests. So, taking the Buchanian perspective to transition ethics does not necessarily mean exclusive advocacy of human rights.

In the Buchanian interpretation institutions failing the global test should be regarded as politically illegitimate, since they threaten to destabilize the conditions of protection of the most basic interests articulated as human rights, that is, they threaten to spoil the grounds of justification of their power. The interpretation retains Gardiner’s idea about “appropriate norms” as the foundation of political legitimacy. Yet the norms of political legitimacy are completely different from those that Gardiner defends. Importantly, the Buchanian norms of justice are defined and defended in terms on concessive ethical argumentation taking considerations of practicability explicitly into account. Thus, it

has means to stay properly modest and better resist wishful thinking despite its non-concessive ethical integrity. It also remains flexible to a degree. The non-concessive core as the commitment to the protection of the most basic interests is not given in. Yet the secondary articulation or, if you will, operationalization of the commitment as protection of the most basic human rights can be flexibly adjusted or even substituted.

The account seems capable of dealing with challenges akin to the unity complaint not only due to the concessive features guaranteeing flexibility and modesty, but also by taking a transformative and politically salient stand. Admittedly, it is characteristically effortless (and perhaps immodest?) to make universalistic representation claims based on human rights. Yet I suggest that these are understood, with McKean, as manifestation of ethics being used for transformative and contestable political purposes. Despite their universalism that one could mock as empty, the most basic human rights promise to be operative weapons in particular political struggles across the world for better protection of the basic interests of persons.

What the Buchanian interpretation discards from Gardiner's ideas are the relational considerations of hypothetical voluntarism. This might seem like a high price to pay in transition ethics. However, and perhaps counter-intuitively, I argue in the next section that given the uncertain circumstances of climate politics and the relatively clear transitional targets, taking a stand might be a way to go for transition ethicists.

3.4 Ethical integrity over immobilizing suspiciousness

I have discussed Gardiner's global test, which I argued is a key transitional principle for concessive transition ethics. This is because the global test is an argument that shows political illegitimacy of the institutions that should be overhauled in climate transitions. I argued that when the global test is explicitly connected to political legitimacy, it is revealed as ambiguous in terms of its normative sources and, consequently, its status as a concessive transitional principle. Additionally, Gardiner ambiguous ideas about the test may risk wishful thinking. So, I drew two alternative interpretations of the test in terms of political legitimacy that promise to fare better. The interpretations emphasize and extend different aspects of Gardiner's account but also depart from it remarkably. The political realist account takes concession quite far in its context-sensitivity and familiarity with the empirical concept of political legitimacy. There is only a weak non-

concessive element in the account, the first political question, which is also the basis of the political realist global test. In the Buchanian account the global test is based on a strong non-concessive ethical principle of equal protection of the most basic interests, but still retains some concessive elements.

There is a final issue left to discuss: which interpretation or, rather, associated approach is more appropriate in concessive transition ethics? First thing to note is that both interpretations face specific objections, which are not engaged directly here. Political realists face, to name a few, the charges that their accounts allow ethically heinous states to be politically legitimate (see 3.3.1) and that they operate with simplistic vertical schemes of power (Freedon, 2018, pp. 355–356). Also, the nature of normativity of political realist legitimacy remains highly contested (see Erman & Möller, 2015c, 2018; Jubb & Rossi, 2015a, 2015b). The Buchanian account has its own share of objections: on top of the worries about its variability and weakness (Simmons, 2010, pp. 29–30) it needs to face some well-known critiques of human rights (e.g. Buchanan, 2003, pp. 147–190; see McKean, 2016).

Instead of these account specific objections, I assess the interpretations in terms of their prospects for the specific goal of concessive transition ethics: ethical agency-building for climate transitions. My argument is that the Buchanian approach might be more promising of the two, *assuming* that the action-guidance ambition of transition ethics is viable at all. I argue that this is not primarily because the Buchanian global test considered in isolation would be clearly better than the political realist alternative. Rather the Buchanian approach more generally taken fits the action-guiding ambitions of transition ethics.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, I argue that if the political realist approach is more generally applied in transition ethics, one faces specific theoretical vices related to wishful thinking and strategic inconsiderateness. In a word, the worry is that “[political] realism – – often overlooks the costs associated with adopting [political] realism itself” (McKean, 2016, p. 1). I argue that the root of the vices is the political realist suspicion to all positive ethical demands (see Hall & Sleat, 2017) and the detached and relativized “second-order” perspective on politics it evokes. Secondly, I argue that the Buchanian account seems to be better protected from the theoretical vices. This is because it sets proper limits to modesty in transition ethics and informs the consideration of flexibility

by taking a clear ethical stand. This non-concessive ethical integrity seems recommendable for transition ethicists in the uncertain and acute circumstances of the climate crisis. It may also make the Buchanian account initially more relevant for the political movement struggling for the ethical climate transitions.

I also conclude that political realism is an important limit case of concession for transitions ethicists, which demonstrates why clear prescriptive ethics may be important even in goal-oriented and concessive transition ethics. Political realists also provide valuable critical reminders about the unavoidable compromises in transition ethics.

To elaborate the theoretical vices of political realism, I rely on critics that have recently noted the issues while discussing action-guidance prospects of political realism. Firstly, though political realists are at pains to show that their ideas do not lead to inability to criticize the status quo (e.g. Prinz & Rossi, 2017; Sagar, 2017; Cozzaglio, 2020; Cross, 2020), McQueen (2020) argues that they may end up upholding it “by default rather than by design”. Secondly, Ulaş (2020) argues that political realists’ orientation may demand from its targets inaccessible “double-mindedness” (he uses Bernard Williams’ term here) about the nature of politics.

I discuss first the “conservative by default” vice. It can be compared to strategic inconsiderateness. I have already argued in Chapter 2 that the latter entails manipulation, neglect of empirical uncertainties and implicit yet contestable ethical assumptions. Charging the political realist approach directly of these faults is not charitable. Despite context-sensitivity, they still retain respectable normative elements of avoiding the universal objects of fear and respecting autonomy and capability of subjects in establishing mutually acknowledged relations of power. Therefore, it is not evident that there are risks of ethical heedlessness, unprincipled manipulation or total self-defeating concession. Also, despite some political realists seem to share Gardiner’s wish about action-guidance as agency-building (Ulaş, 2020; Jubb, 2017), others remain suspicious (Jubb, 2017, pp. 122, 127–128; Hall, 2013, pp. 235–238). Therefore, all political realists may not be exposed to hubris and neglect of uncertainties and complexities.

Political realism often comes with naturalization and historization of morality, and (at most) minimal trust in context-transcending moral truths (see Estlund, 2017, p. 397).

McQueen's⁴² (2020, pp. 14–15) argument is that when this ethical skepticism is combined with the typical political realist practice of unmasking real but hidden motivations and interests behind justifications of political agendas, it can become psychologically and practically hard for them to back any principled accounts that are needed to challenge the powers that be. “All proposals are suspect, and therefore the status quo is likely to continue by default, as no more obviously unjustified than any alternative” (Ibid.), as McQueen puts it. This may make the political realist approach unhelpful in guiding more radical departures from the status quo that are needed to tackle the climate crisis, even though the political realist global test might be a good start.

Note that this is precisely an example of a theoretical vice. There are no clear theoretical reasons why political realists could not argue for principled alternatives but doing so is difficult given their skeptical philosophical attitude (Ibid.). While strategic inconsiderateness is about (undue) overlooking of ethics and ethical motivations, political realist suspicion extends to all political agendas. If the former may encourage heedless and manipulative tactics, the latter risks immobilization. In comparison, Gardiner's account of moral corruption has also faced objections of being too generally and damagingly suspicious of people's moral judgement (see 2.2.2). But these accusations are easier to escape to Gardiner than to political realists because he has no qualms about defending the right ethical reasons that should motivate the climate transitions.

The risk of becoming conservative by default could be at the same time pronounced and attenuated in the case of the global test. It is pronounced because political realist legitimacy is tied to contextual reasons, which are not only plural but “often as confused, potentially contradictory, incomplete, and pliable as anything else” (Geuss, 2008, p. 36). Therefore, making judgements about political legitimacy of any specific institution demands contestable interpretation and generalization. Arguably, in many cases the more anti-status-quo an interpretation is, the more contestable it becomes, at least in the context of the North, where the state institutions are still largely relatively stable. Here the political realist suspiciousness may be alerted: is the interpretation challenging political legitimacy of an institution based on the perspectives of some sub-

⁴² McQueen discusses the work of classic IR-realists E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, but I think the argument is generalizable.

set of agents (like “the environmentalists”) rather than on a genuine overall judgement of most important contextual reasons? Whose interests does it really serve?

However, the case of the global test might also be easier. It sets a clear and scientifically well-founded condition of political legitimacy in terms of an existential security threat. The political realist global test may in a sense be general enough to be too contestable or “ideological”, given that there is a common understanding about the existential threat. Nevertheless, transition ethics is only initially about challenging the current institutions; it should be also able to motivate better alternatives to them⁴³. Therefore, when considering the broader question of what kind of approach is needed in transition ethics, risk of becoming conservative by default is a disadvantage.

The other theoretical vice is essentially the political realist version of wishful thinking (see especially 2.2). Shortly put, it is about the implausibly demanding forms of reflexivity that political realist action-orientation expects, supposing its audience is people at large. To be thoroughly internalized, political realist orientation demands a relativization of attitudes on political convictions and political disagreement (Ulaş, 2020, p. 15). Agents should see their convictions not as “autonomous products of moral reason” (Williams 2005, p. 13) but as historical creatures with multiple, non-rational and even incompatible causes and components. This calls for two kinds of “double-mindedness”. Firstly, people should be able to hold-on to their convictions despite recognizing their contingency and non-rationality (Ulaş, 2020, pp. 16–17). Secondly, people should be able to think about political and moral disagreement from a new perspective (Ibid., p. 17–18). They should not see their opponents simply as mistaken and wrong about moral truths. Rather, though people should continue to advocate their commitments, they should also respect the differing opinions of others and pay heed to the fact that there is “a *genuine* loss of liberty to them” if their commitments are enforced upon their opponents (Ibid., p. 15, original emphasis; cf. Enoch 2015, pp. 130–133).

Ulaş argues that even granting that Williams and other political realists are factually correct about the contingency of ethical and political commitments, it is unfeasible to expect that people at large could practice double-mindedness. This is because recent

⁴³ Or, at least, institutions that could produce the alternatives. See Gardiner (2014) for a proposal: global constitutional convention focused on future generations.

political and moral psychology does not support high expectations on ethical reasoning capacities of people, especially in cases of heated political polarization as in climate politics (Ulaş, 2020, p. 17; see Chapter 2; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Haidt, 2012).

Affectively driven defensive reasoning and collective self-righteousness are far more dominant dynamics than reasoned and balanced consideration, not to mention skeptic and self-reflexive relativization of one's own convictions.

The charge is stinging for political realists since they often call for political theorists to take heed of empirically informed “*realpsychologie*” (Ulaş, 2020, p. 2). Yet one should bear in mind that explaining moral and political phenomena (e.g., climate transition inertia) in terms of rigid “psychological barriers” (i.e., ingrained limits of evolutionary developed human brain and behavior) risks omitting the role of structural, historical and social factors (Schmitt et al., 2020). However, it is not necessary to go deep into psychology to note that double-mindedness “anticipates a radical change to the phenomenology of disagreement” (Ulaş 2020, p. 17). Despite metaethical disputes, political activists are usually fighting for what is good and just in a non-relativized sense (Enoch 2015, pp. 134–137). This is perhaps especially so in the political struggles for climate justice, where activists seem to effortlessly intermingle moral truths with scientific facts. The key point is this: it would demand remarkable shifts in the ways in which people generally experience politics and ethical life, if double-mindedness is to become accessible and orienting for the political movements ushering the climate transitions. Though the limits of reflective capacity of humanity are uncertain, the expectation of reflexivity seems too distant to be the basis of transition ethics in the next few decades.

So, curiously, reflective ethical skepticism might subject political realists to wishful thinking. This holds *to the extent that* they share the strong ambition that action-guiding theory should have the potential to be internalized by the target agents, and assuming that in the case of climate transitions the target agents must be rather prevalent either in quantity or political influence. Does the more specific idea of political realist global test already involve wishful expectations? I think there is a risk, though the implications of broader political realist approach are more important here too. Though it seems that the existential security threat and the first question account are easy to articulate in clear first-order ethical terms, even considering the first question involves certain relativization. After all, only the contextual reasons of people dictate what is a

legitimate answer to the first question in their political community (see Williams, 2005, p. 14). Political realist could of course retreat from the action-guidance ambitions of transition ethics – they may well be subject to “[c]omplacency – – about the motivational and cognitive power of philosophy” (Jubb, 2017, p. 122). But if they share the ambitions, political realists face the tricky questions of “to whom” their accounts are really (and not only rhetorically) targeted (see Williams, 2011, pp. 27, 30–31), whether such agents have the capacity to be oriented in such ways and how their re-orientation helps bringing forth the climate transitions. For instance, should political realists claim that double-mindedness is to be adopted only by change-making elites (e.g., politicians, movement leaders), it is not clear that even they can keep up the combination of effective action and epistemic humbleness on the moral truth of their actions (McQueen, 2020, p. 16).

I think that the Buchanian account fares better in avoiding the theoretical vices. This is largely because instead of sophisticated relativizations that may slip into immobilizing suspiciousness and demanding detachment, the Buchanian approach maintains what I call non-concessive ethical integrity. The approach is based on clear first-order ethics. It does not face the problem with formulating alternatives to the status-quo since the same principles that show the current system illegitimate can be used as a basis for institutional overhaul. Nor is it demanding tricky double-mindedness about politics. It rests on an idea that protection of the most basic human rights is based on an ethical truth and is thus worth fighting for.

There are two positive reasons why ethical integrity might be useful especially for concessive transition ethics. Firstly, and ironically, as Hamilton (2014) passionately (but not entirely fairly) argues against Gardiner⁴⁴, what is perhaps the most mobilizing thing to profess *for a climate philosopher* in the messy circumstances of climate crisis is moral clarity and courage, and not immobilizing skeptical uncertainty fetishism. The political realist emphasis on empirical relevance offers a reminder that audience and context are vitally important for effectiveness of specific ethical reasons and articulations. This restriction should not be wished away in a concessive theory. Perhaps sometimes ethics just cannot help a lot. Yet usually, one cannot know for sure what works and what are the limits of political possibility in each case. In contrast, the overall

⁴⁴ “Rather than creating a perfect storm, the ethical winds blow strongly in one direction.” (Hamilton, 2014, p. 336).

targets of climate transitions are clear: we should overhaul our institutions to limit the climate heating to 1,5 °C in the next few decades. It is also clear that to achieve this, we need to get way beyond the business as usual. Political realist global test shows that the business as usual is illegitimate. The Buchananian account articulates clear moral reasons for this that can be used to formulate positive criteria on the shape of better institutions and transitional policies. It is true that the positive criteria must be formulated and defended in face of ethical and practical uncertainty. But it is worth the effort, if the alternative is concession to the status quo by default. The pragmatic spirit of “get on with it” (Kowarsch & Edenhofer, 2016; Buchanan, 2003, p. 43) seems recommendable for transition ethics, not least because clearly articulated ethics may (rather than merely tapping into already existing reasons and mentalities) help to create new agreement, agencies and understanding (Buchanan, 2003, p. 40). In other words, as Gardiner (2013, p. 130) puts it, at some point ethics may “simply have to take a stand”. “Indeed, it is possible that in the end fairly specific and controversial ethical claims are the best (or even the only) hope for motivating change.” (Ibid.).

Secondly, and relatedly, by taking a stand in the Buchananian way, it may become more possible for transition ethicists to join forces with the global climate movement, currently perhaps the most promising political force to propel *ethical* climate transitions. One could object here that the climate movement should not be a privileged political actor for transition ethics. It does not have direct power over the institutions fueling the climate crisis. The point is fair. My quick answer is that the movement seems more promising as vehicle of *ethically* motivated climate transitions than, for instance, states and businesses. The two latter have strong structurally determined and narrow economic and political incentives that initially allow less room for ethical concerns (except on the level of lip service and strategic communication). If directly targeting states and businesses, transition ethicists would perhaps need to concede more from the ethical reasons for climate action. This is not to say that states and businesses should not be targeted directly. But the reason for the special significance of the climate movement is that it may be able to win more social and political influence for the ethical considerations. Therefore, transition ethicists may be able to indirectly affect the powerful economic and political actors with the movement.

In contrast to some political scientists (see Delina et al., 2014), Gardiner is not explicitly discussing this opportunity. He is rather advocating “modest redirection of the public

debate” – presumably directly realized by the marginal group of academic philosophers. A reason for this may be that most of his writings predate the late 2010’s energization of the climate movement. Now the climate activists are obvious ally-candidates for transition ethicists, especially considering the strong ethical tone of communication put forward by the new prominent figures like Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer and Ellen Ojala. Non-concessive ethical integrity might help in this regard, since political struggles for climate justice are often precisely about first-order moral commitments seen as true and right in a non-relativized and “non-indexical” sense (see Enoch, 2015, p. 131).

Of course, transition ethicists should have distinct role from that of the activists (see *Ibid.*, p. 137). At least it may not be advisable for philosophers to adopt a dogmatic and inflexible “resolves” for the cause (Gardiner, 2013, pp. 130–131; cf. Di Paola, 2013). Transition philosophers should stay critical of the ethical credibility *and* strategic viability of the reasons animating political action. Yet, as political realists remind, when pursuing a practical and political role, philosophers must “inevitably be partisan – – [since] impartiality is not a stable position inside the world of politics” (Philp, 2012, p. 646). There is no reason to think that this would not apply to climate politics (e.g. Forchtner, 2019). So, transition ethicists might be better to shake-off (except maybe rhetorically, if useful) the pursuit to address the common moral person of all “decent” people of the North (see Chapter 2) and related positioning of themselves above the political divisions (see Enoch, 2015, pp. 135–136). Nevertheless, even if transition ethicists would get partisan, it is far from evident that the activists find their contributions useful. Rather, transition ethicists must prove themselves useful to the movement, which might be a big challenge. Here, I argue, maintaining non-concessive ethical integrity is a more promising way to go than advocating tricky double-mindedness.

It is good to emphasize that though the Buchanan account retains ethical integrity, it remains accessible, that is, to an extent sensitive to the contextual factors that may affect practicability of its demands and articulations. As is claimed above, the human rights articulation for protection of the most basic ethically relevant interests is advocated not only for its theoretical credibility, but for its political salience and adoptability over various contexts. The Buchanan account is open to different articulations and interpretations of human rights suitable for the context at hand. Also, I think it is not

impossible to imagine that the human rights perspective is to be extended or even displaced by other articulations. This is especially so if human rights are too “presentist” and anthropocentric for the climate crisis.

So, in the case of the global test, the Buchanian approach to transition ethics may not refute the alternative ethical interpretations of the test (i.e., the existential security threat evoking the first question and the humanity’s perspective combined with the delegated responsibility model). They may be taken into the concessive part of the account, that is, connected to the most basic human rights, when they seem relevant and practicable. The key point here is, continuing with the corporeal metaphor, that the Buchanian account has the advantageous combination of non-concessive core (equal institutional protection of the most basic ethically relevant interests) and concessive limbs (the most basic human rights), which, respectively, guard against strategic inconsiderateness and wishful thinking.

Perhaps now when non-concessive ethical integrity of the Buchanian account seems appropriate for transition ethics, one could be tempted to do away with concession completely. Philosophers should trust that the ethical truth will prevail in the end. And if it will not, it is nevertheless better to leave concessive agency-building to political influencers and strategists who are more capable at the job. To resist this purifying temptation, the last political realist reminder should be stated. In contrast to Hamilton’s plea, modesty in front of the profound moral uncertainty and complexity of the theoretical storm should not be forgotten in transition ethics (see e.g. Hulme, 2015). Especially reasons of the subjects and their acknowledged institutional relations are valuable here, and not only for the sake of practicability. The profound ethical consideration of autonomy of the subjects (left undiscussed in this work) should remain as an important (but not trumping) consideration in transition ethics, especially amid perhaps lasting (though far from total) ethical uncertainty. Appealing *only* to controversial moral theories is, simply put, “too easy” (Prinz & Rossi, 2017, p. 350; see also Gaus, 2015, p. 1088). It also risks the vice of explaining disagreement of the opponents of climate transitions too reductively only in terms of psychological and institutional biases – such as moral corruption or vested interest – as people typically do when considering their political opponents (Ulaş, 2020, pp. 17–18). Of course, vices and biases are often relevant, and transition ethics cannot avoid partisanship. But being too obsessed about “the duty to truth” (see Hamilton, 2014) may make transition

ethicists unable to see that even the opponents of climate measures may sometimes also have profound ethical worries in terms of their dearest values (see Campbell & Kay, 2014).

Yet to conclude, the discussion also suggests why there is a reason to limit modesty in transition ethics. In the uncertain and complex circumstances, there is an intellectual push for modesty. Yet if ethics tries to be helpful in motivating acute and drastic climate transitions, intellectual reserves should be loosened. Modesty should not slip into “uncertainty fetishism” and inability to articulate potentially politically powerful ethical claims. The relentless suspicion of political realists, perhaps a radicalized form of modesty, is intellectually admirable but too immobilizing for transition ethics. Yet transition ethicists should stay aware of the compromises in their approach to protect themselves from the theoretical vices. Furthermore, the chapter suggests how relatively non-concessive ethical stands can be recommendable also from the perspective of practicability. This informs the idea of goal-oriented flexibility in concessive theory: more concession does not always help transition ethicists to further the goal of ethical agency-building for climate transitions. This may hold even though more non-concession often means more controversy – in both philosophy and politics.

4 On Dispersing the Fog of Confusion

The thesis has addressed two research questions. Firstly, I interpreted, complemented and extended Gardiner's relatively thin discussion on the philosophical practice of transition ethics called for in the climate crisis. In Chapter 1 I distanced transition ethics from the strict Rawlsian interpretations of non-ideal theory to which Gardiner himself relates the practice. Instead, I argued that transition ethics should be understood as concessive theory in David Estlund's sense. I argued that concessive transition ethics has two interactive main components, diagnostic and prescriptive. It weighs the advocacy of moral principles and motivations with their political possibility, accessibility in our circumstances, likelihood of realization and effectiveness in mobilizing climate transitions. In other words, concessive ethics concedes from the ethically correct prescriptions in the name of practicability. Yet concessive transition ethics remains profoundly indeterminate and circumstantial since there are no *apriori* methodological rules on the weighing, that is, what moral principles should be conceded for practicability, in which cases and to what extent. Instead, I argued that transition ethics should remain flexible about degrees and areas of concession and think about them in terms of the goal of agency-building for climate transitions. Thus, degrees and areas of concession can vary from case to case, depending on local limits of practicability. In addition to flexibility and interactivity, concessive transition ethics should remain intellectually modest amid the theoretical storm. That is, it should avoid prejudging contentious ethical issues as far as possible and stay aware of the circumstantial nature of its prescriptions.

Secondly, I subjected concessive transition ethics to virtue ethical critique guided by the concept of theoretical vice and skepticism of political realism. Additionally, I thought about some ways to mitigate the threat of theoretical vices. I noted in Chapter 2 that transition ethicists are threatened by the twin vices of wishful thinking and strategic inconsiderateness that get their leverage from the lasting tension between concession and non-concession in transition ethics. Both vices are distortions of interaction between the diagnostic and prescriptive moments of transition ethics. In wishful thinking the sound non-concessive moral principles are conditioning the diagnosis of the problem and (what are seen as) practicable solutions to it too much. I argued that the elevated status of the moral corruption diagnosis in Gardiner's transition ethics evokes

strong suspicions of wishful thinking. Strategic inconsiderateness is about overestimation of certainty and accuracy of empirical knowledge on political possibility, accessibility, likelihood and effectiveness of certain strategies and measures. It leads to the attitude of favoring “whatever works” for a given audience, that is, to heedless and even manipulative over-concession of ethically sound reasons and motivations.

In Chapter 3 I discussed Gardiner’s transitional principle called the global test to illuminate some ways to mitigate the threat of theoretical vices. The global test is a central transitional argument since it shows why the major institutions to be overhauled in climate transitions should be refuted by their subjects. That is, the global test shows the importance of considering political legitimacy in transition ethics. I interpreted the test as a condition of political legitimacy in the climate crisis and pointed out that Gardiner’s ideas on the normative grounds of the test are ambiguous and suspect to wishful thinking. I formulated two alternative interpretations of the test as a condition of political legitimacy. They emphasize different elements of Gardiner’s account and depart from it to different directions. The first is based on political realism. It takes concession quite far in emphasizing context-sensitivity and affinity to the empirical concept of political legitimacy. The other interpretation is inspired by Allen Buchanan’s political philosophy. It bases political legitimacy and the test on clear ethical principles. The core of these principles, equal protection of the most basic interests of all, is non-concessive. Yet the articulation or operationalization of the core principle as the most basic human rights is open to considerations of practicability.

Though both interpretations are less ambiguous than Gardiner’s ideas and can avoid immediate suspicions of wishful thinking and strategic inconsiderateness, I argue that the approach of the Buchanian alternative seems more appropriate for concessive transition ethics. The skepticism and intellectual detachment of political realism subjects it to specific theoretical vices if it is applied to agency-building transition ethics. Instead, the Buchanian approach rests on clear, politically salient, defensible, properly malleable ethical basis that helps it to avoid suspicious immobilization and strategic inconsiderateness. It also allows articulating ethical stands, which are potential tools in partisan political mobilization. It shakes of Gardiner’s pretension to speak to the moral person of almost all and thus mitigates the threat of wishful thinking.

The Buchanian approach shows that there are limits to the virtue of modesty in uncertain yet acute circumstances of the climate crisis. For transition ethicists it seems better to boldly take a stand against ethical and practical uncertainty. Ethical integrity may make it more possible for transition ethicists to help in building and reproducing of the ethically motivated agency of the climate movement. The Buchanian approach also provides reminders about goal-oriented flexibility: sometimes advocating impracticable non-concessive ethics may be the best way to further the goal of ethical agency-building.

This does not mean that political realist suspicion is of no use in transition ethics. The key reminders from political realism to transition ethics about audience-sensitivity, necessity of political partisanship and lasting moral uncertainty and complexity of the climate crisis may protect at least from wishful thinking. More generally, we can follow Sangiovanni (2008, p. 163) in noting that practical (climate) ethics may need the dialectic of positive, constructive and justificatory accounts and negative, unmasking and disruptive critique. Indeed, Gardiner's transition ethics and especially his diagnosis of the different forms of moral corruption of climate politics is an example of unmasking and disruptive critique. And it is perhaps one of the main reasons why his transition ethics stays relevant in the deceptive atmosphere of the current climate politics. The fog of confusion surrounding climate politics of the North is arguably even thicker now when straightforward denial of human-caused climate change has fallen out of fashion. Unmasking is called for when all seem to agree on the Paris goals, all say that they are doing their best (or "at least something") to tackle the crisis, but still not nearly enough is done. Though the thesis takes a critical look on Gardiner's hope in the power of ethical motivation, I contend that it is more important than ever to focus on the slippery agency of those who "do something" but not enough.

The central message of this work is that transition ethicists should not exempt themselves from the unmasking gaze because their ambitious approach makes them especially vulnerable to theoretical vices. So, perhaps above all else, the thesis calls for constant (self-)reflectivity from transition ethicists. Yet, ironically, political realism offers a cautionary example that being too preoccupied with dispersing the fog of confusion may lead to paralyzing suspicion that does not help with agency-building. This may be just another lasting tension of ambitiously action-guiding climate ethics done in the circumstances of profound uncertainty and acute rush.

There are several limitations to the thesis and things that would be worthy of further discussion. Some are mentioned already in the previous chapters. I conclude the work by mentioning or re-stating some important issues. Firstly, the idea of action-guidance and what it demands from practical philosophy was left in the air. It is hugely uncertain if Gardiner's ambition that academic ethics could really contribute to production and reproduction of motivated agency for climate transitions to any meaningful extent is realistic at all. Of course, it is not clear what "to any meaningful extent" might mean. How much impact can one credibly expect from any philosophical work? Though large-scale societal changes are sometimes explained in terms of ideas or ideology, there may not be any reliable way to vindicate such impact. As some political realists are skeptical about the whole idea that political philosophy or ethics could guide political action in any meaningful sense, they might have the last laugh after all.

At least it seems that on the one hand many climate ethicists and political philosophers strive for action-guidance. Maybe considering transition ethics could push them to think about how much involvement with real agents of change and their motivations "action-guidance" asks for. On the other hand, some recent political movements advocating climate transitions and justice – a notable example being Extinction Rebellion – make heavy use of concepts originating from academic ethics and political philosophy in their demands and actions. So, there may exist demand and supply for contributions of philosophers. Yet philosophers perhaps should not dream of being in control of how their contributions are appropriated in the movement.

This brings us to the second limitation. Given that the solutions to the climate crisis have become a politically dividing issue and that transition ethicists need to get partisan to get involved, there is a need for proper analysis of power in addition and connection to virtue ethical critique of moral corruption. For instance, though I have assumed that taking part in and supporting the climate movement is the most promising way forward, this assumption should be backed by an analysis of how is it possible for the movement to gain enough political power to have a real influence. Also, the ideas of political legitimacy used in transition ethics should be based on a proper analysis of power, which is lacking in Chapter 3. The way I present the global test does not give a nuanced and realistic enough image of how people live with and struggle against political authorities.

The third limitation considers the question of political opposition. If many people are not morally corrupt but genuinely opposed to climate transitions, transition ethics needs to think about what to do with them. It is possible that defensive reasoners familiar from Chapter 2 can no more be “another story” for transition ethicists, as they were to Gardiner and as they largely were in this thesis too. Here the question of political legitimacy is also central. The image that I draw on the role of political legitimacy in climate transitions in Chapter 3 is one-sided. In the public debate it is more usual that political legitimacy is brought up in the discussions on acceptability of climate policies for common people. If there is a specter haunting climate politics of the Global North, it is the specter of hiking energy prizes and the yellow vests (see Vadén, 2021).

Political opposition and legitimacy are connected to another limitation: Chapter 3 was largely silent on how to think about the relational value of political legitimacy, that is, the value of autonomy and mutually recognized institutions. Ideas of autonomy seem importantly dependent on analyses of power and subjectivity. To what extent can we say that people make real autonomous choices about the political authorities that subject them? It is also important to relate autonomy to the substantivist values of political legitimacy, especially the protection of the most basic interests.

The last point I mention here is the special status that Gardiner grants for the intergenerational storm as the source of ethical motivation. Is it so that focusing on the threats that the current generation imposes on the future is the best way to build ethical motivation for climate transitions across different contexts and worldviews? Subchapter 2.3.2 already argued that though many are likely not willing to impose hazards on “future generations”, the concept itself and especially what it means to treat future generations justly is highly disputed in politics. Gardiner is probably right that there is a shared concern. Yet it is an open question whether future generations should be treated as a prioritized source of ethical motivation in transition ethics in contrast to, say, the acute security threats of climate heating and the havoc it brings on to non-human living beings and ecosystems.

5 References

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