

Moral Collapse in a Warming World

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In his definitive book *A Perfect Moral Storm*, ethicist Stephen Gardiner argues that the way forward in a climate-changed world is so difficult in part because we “do not yet have a good understanding of many of the ethical issues at stake in global-warming policy.”¹ We remain confused about such vital questions as who should take responsibility for the current condition, how to preserve equity between generations, and how best to think about our responsibility toward nonhuman animals. The resistance of governments to taking action, attempts by various players to throw sand in the eyes of the public, and specious arguments used to justify an unwillingness to do what is necessary all add to our moral bafflement.

But is it really so hard for us to know what we should do? The science is very clear: to avoid dangerous global warming the nations of the world must begin immediately to reduce their emissions and continue to do so rapidly. Before the 2009 Copenhagen conference, a group of eminent scientists reevaluated the science of climate change and concluded that to have a good chance of limiting global warming to not more than 2 degrees Celsius, developed countries would need to cut their greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent by 2020 with large reductions from developing countries following in later periods.²

This was the task, and it would not have been too difficult, given the will, to work out how much each developed economy needed to commit to on the basis of some fairly straightforward ethical principles. We already had a widely agreed upon set of principles to guide global action, as embedded in the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which has been ratified by virtually all nations. The Kyoto Protocol elaborated on these principles and was likewise agreed to by all nations at the 1997 conference, including the

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United States. However, in a display of bad faith, the United States (and, for a time, Australia) later reneged on its commitment and refused to ratify the treaty.

Carbon emissions have now accumulated to the point where avoiding warming by 2 degrees Celsius is impossible. Even under optimistic assumptions about the speed with which countries might respond, it now seems likely that the world will warm by 4 degrees Celsius or more, which will transform the conditions of life on the planet and result in catastrophes. Even the overly cautious analysis of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) cannot disguise these facts. Indeed, we know with certainty what must be done to avoid enormous harm, particularly to poor and vulnerable people—a task rendered less onerous by the fact that all economic studies show that the transition to a low-carbon energy system could be achieved at modest cost. Rather than creating a perfect storm, the ethical winds blow strongly in one direction. It is true, as Gardiner writes, that the debate is plagued by moral corruption—“the subversion of our moral discourse to our own ends”—yet moral corruption prevails not because the situation is inherently murky, but because confusion has been deliberately sown, and because the public and political representatives have welcomed reasons to shirk their ethical obligations.

There are three kinds of actors in this process of subversion: those who tell the lies, those who repeat the lies, and those who allow themselves to be seduced by the lies.

THOSE WHO TELL LIES

Moral confusion has been created by a well-funded and clever campaign, launched in the 1990s, aimed at casting doubt on the science of climate change. The strategy was developed in the United States, implemented by conservative think tanks, and funded largely by fossil fuel interests. The history of this campaign and its effects have now been carefully documented and explained.³ Recently, the vast sums of “dark money” that continue to flow into the denial machine have been documented by Robert Brulle.⁴ The campaign has been highly effective and has since been exported to other countries.⁵ In the 1990s a U.S. citizen’s views on global warming were influenced mostly by attentiveness to the science; now, one can make a good guess at an American’s opinion on global warming by identifying his or her views on abortion, same-sex marriage, and gun control. The campaign to deny climate science turned global warming into a battleground in a wider culture war. Thus,

surveys in the United States show that among those who dismiss climate science, three-quarters describe themselves as “conservative” and only 3 percent as “liberal” (with the rest self-identifying as “moderate”).⁶

The tactics used by think tanks, corporations, and foundations in the climate science denial movement have been exposed in a large number of books and articles,⁷ sometimes based on the release of secret documents to courts. These tactics include communicating to the public statements that are flagrantly untrue; cherry-picking data from climate science papers and reports to give an erroneous impression of their results or to undermine their validity; hiding the sources of funding to think tanks that carry out work that discredits climate science; creating front groups in order to conceal their backers and intentions; sully the reputations of sincere scientists; and intimidating and threatening scientists and others who speak out, with a view to driving them from the public debate.⁸ These tactics involve deception, misinformation, and coercion, all of which are ethically reprehensible. Yet when something of immense importance is at stake—and what could be more important than the survival of the most vulnerable of the Earth’s citizens in the face of famine, flood, and epidemic—we owe an absolute allegiance to the truth, and must put aside any ideological or financial discomfort that the truth may raise. Hiding this truth is the essential moral failing of those who deny the science of climate change.

THOSE WHO REPEAT LIES

In addition to those who manufacture lies and engage in various deceitful strategies to undermine climate science, there are some who amplify the lies and contribute to the smearing of scientists for political or personal reasons. Collectively, they are sometimes known as the “echo chamber,” and include newspaper editors and columnists, prominent bloggers, politicians, and influential public figures.

Such people of course claim to be speaking the truth. Reading their contributions to the debate, one is struck by their absolute conviction that their stance is the only ethically defensible one. As in all instances where an understanding of a complex issue requires advanced expertise, those without training must decide not *what* to believe but *who* to believe. In this case we are obliged to accept the verdict of those most qualified to deliver it, that is, those recognized within the community of scientists as the experts with the best knowledge and insight. That status is achieved through successful participation in the system of

peer-reviewed research published in professional journals. A recent analysis of the peer-reviewed scientific literature found that among abstracts expressing a position on anthropogenic global warming, 97 percent endorsed the consensus position that humans are causing global warming.⁹ Yet some prominent individuals with no expertise whatsoever deem themselves capable of overruling the consensus of a vast body of scientific research to prosecute a set of beliefs that have been rejected by every scientific academy in the world and have been systematically debunked by legitimate scientists.

The prominent Australian Cardinal George Pell—recently appointed to a senior administrative position in the Vatican—is an interesting case. In various speeches and newspaper articles Pell has condemned established science and reproduced manifestly untrue claims made by people with no credibility as climate scientists and who are unwilling to submit their claims to the established processes of professional review.¹⁰ In making his various claims he nowhere cites, or indicates that he has read, the vast mass of evidence compiled, reviewed, and validated by hundreds of scientists in the peer-reviewed literature and presented in the reports of science academies from around the world. His disregard for facts leaves him making various assertions that are not merely untrue but, for anyone with even a casual knowledge of climate science, risible. Cardinal Pell concedes that his entry into the climate science debate was motivated by his disdain for environmentalism, which he sees as anti-human. To explain away the consensus of opinion among qualified climate scientists he resorts to conspiracy theories, suggesting that the IPCC is keeping certain statistics secret and that a “small, tight-knit group of computer modellers” is suppressing contradictory evidence.

It should be said that, against Cardinal Pell’s fervent rejection of science, the Catholic church has come down firmly on the side of science. A 2011 report by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences declared: “Humanity is changing the climate system through its emissions of greenhouse gases and heat-absorbing particulate pollution.” It made the ethical case strongly: “Failure to mitigate climate change will violate our duty to the vulnerable of the Earth. . . . By acting now . . . we accept our duty to one another and to the stewardship of a planet blessed with the gift of life.”¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI was harshly critical of those who refused to accept the need to act, singling out “the negligence or refusal of many . . . to exercise responsible stewardship over the environment.”¹²

THOSE SEDUCED BY LIES

What about the rest of us? The influence of the campaign against climate science and the scientists who produce it has been felt much more widely than just among the “conservative white males” most prone to accept the claims of denialism.¹³ The campaign would not have been as influential if it had not cast the seeds of doubt on such fertile soil. Most members of the public, while not explicitly disavowing the science of climate change, have deployed various psychological strategies to remove its sting.¹⁴ This kind of casual denial relies on such inner narratives as: “Environmentalists always exaggerate,” “Didn’t those leaked Climategate emails show it’s all dodgy?,” and “I’ll worry about it when the scientists make up their minds.”

Anxiety can be reduced simply by restricting exposure to upsetting information, a form of selective disengagement. The desire to disbelieve is activated by news outlets each time they give undue prominence to stories that create the impression that climate scientists cannot agree or that the science is politically tainted.¹⁵ The emotional impact of the scientific warnings is blunted when we persuade ourselves that the threat is smaller than it actually is, or when we distance ourselves from it by emphasizing the time expected to elapse before the consequences of warming are felt. We use self-deception to good effect, telling ourselves: “Humans have solved these sorts of problems before,” or “It won’t affect me much.” Alternatively, we might divert attention from anxious thoughts and unpleasant emotions by engaging in minor behavior changes (like switching to low-energy light bulbs) that mollify feelings of helplessness or guilt.

Blame-shifting is another form of moral disengagement whereby we disavow our responsibility for the problem or the solution, a tactic in play whenever we hear someone say “China builds a new coal-fired power plant every week.” Another strategy is to conjure indifference to global warming and its implications. Apathy is typically understood as meaning the absence of feeling, but it can often reflect a suppression of feeling that serves a useful psychological function.¹⁶

Perhaps the most widespread method of avoidance is the practice of wishful thinking. Cultivating “benign fictions” can be comforting in an often unfriendly world, yet such fictions become dangerous delusions when they are clung to despite overwhelming evidence.¹⁷ The climate debate is rife with wishful thinking, such as the idea that “technology will save us.” Faith in carbon capture and storage and geoengineering are prominent examples of this type of thinking. We prefer to

remember that Martin Luther King proclaimed “I have a dream,” and do not want to be reminded that in a more reflective mood he also wrote:

In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. . . . Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: “Too late.”

In rich countries the panoply of psychological devices citizens use to deny, dilute, or distance the facts of climate science serve to absolve them of moral responsibility, to avoid self-censure. This enables them to carry on with their lifestyles and vote for governments that do not take global warming seriously. They engage in self-deception in order to protect their hope that the future can be only an enhanced version of the present, even though the mass of evidence indicates that immense suffering will result if they do not change their behavior. This kind of moral recklessness is perhaps a natural human failing, one that historically has been overcome by strong leaders whose moral clarity brings out the best in others. At present there is a dearth of strong leadership, and moral clarity is lost in a fog of confusion manufactured by the morally corrupt and welcomed by others seeking absolution.

THE DUTY TO TRUTH

A minority of citizens, quite small in most countries, has faced up to the full truth of climate change. Among scientists they include James Hansen and Kevin Anderson. These citizens are distinguished not necessarily by a more advanced ethical sensibility but by the fact that they do not allow themselves to use the various escape mechanisms that others have relied on. They *think*, and in that process of thinking their consciences are harsh judges. Although facing up to the facts brings them despair, they feel their first duty is not to their own contentment but to the truth. This takes moral courage. Climate deniers like to congratulate themselves on their courage (adopting the heroic mantle of “skeptic”), but in truth they take the easy way out, jettisoning their commitment to scientific facts in order to defend deeper beliefs threatened by global warming. This is a failure of heart.

In contrast to the few who have admitted the facts, most intellectuals who “know” the truth of climate change act as if it is merely an abstraction. Some continue to write futuristic books without mentioning that the Earth will be

profoundly transformed by warming, as if the dire warnings of the scientific academies and any number of Nobel Prize winners are some kind of peculiar obsession of scientists. These intellectuals are our societies' most highly educated people, putatively those with the deepest insights and the greatest commitment to going where their intellect leads them. So in 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.

At a time when the scientific case for strong action has become unassailable, this subversion of the moral discourse has become so pervasive that it signals a complete moral collapse. It is not that the world is wrestling with an ethical dilemma, searching for a resolution that will enable us to act on our desire to respond to the warnings of climate change. Rather, as the scientific warning bells have been rung evermore loudly, the determination to respond has been fading. Humanity's ethical impulse has dissipated.

The collaboration of the public, those who do not share the fanaticism of the hardline deniers, is the most worrying feature of this history. For if the citizens of each nation were to maintain an allegiance to the truth, that is, to Enlightenment rationality, they could demand that their governments respond fully and forcefully to these warnings. The drift into an irreversibly hostile climate does not reflect confusion about how to respond, but an abandonment of our duties—to protect the world's poorest, to protect future generations, and to protect the Earth itself.

NOTES

- ¹ Stephen Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ² Katherine Richardson et al., *Synthesis Report* from the Climate Change: Global Risks, Challenges & Decisions conference, March 10–12, 2009 (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2009).
- ³ Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth About Climate Change* (London: Earthscan, 2010), ch. 4; Peter Jacques, Riley E. Dunlap, and Mark Freeman, "The Organisation of Denial: Conservative Think Tanks and Environmental Scepticism," *Environmental Politics* 17, no. 3 (2008); Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010); James Hoggan, *Climate Cover-Up* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2009).
- ⁴ Robert Brulle, "Institutionalizing Delay: Foundation Funding and the Creation of U.S. Climate Change Counter-movement Organizations," *Climatic Change* 122, vol. 4 (2014).
- ⁵ For Australia, see Clive Hamilton, *Scorcher: The Dirty Politics of Climate Change* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2007), ch. 10.

- ⁶ Edward Maibach, Connie Roser-Renouf, and Anthony Leiserowitz, *Global Warming's Six Americas 2009: An Audience Segmentation Analysis*, Yale Project on Climate Change and George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, June 19, 2009. See also Riley Dunlap and Aaron McCright, "A Widening Gap: Republican and Democrat Views on Climate Change," *Environment Magazine* 50, no. 5 (2008).
- ⁷ See note 3.
- ⁸ A similar list of transgressions is made by Donald Brown, see: blogs.law.widener.edu/climate/category/climate-change-disinformation/.
- ⁹ John Cook et al., "Quantifying the Consensus on Anthropogenic Global Warming in the Scientific Literature," *Environmental Research Letters* 8, no. 2 (2013).
- ¹⁰ Cardinal George Pell, "One Christian Perspective on Climate Change" (speech to the Global Warming Policy Foundation, London, October 26, 2011). Real climate scientists have responded to Pell's speech here: www.crikey.com.au/2011/10/28/climate-scientists-slam-george-pells-utter-rubbish-claims/.
- ¹¹ "Fate of Mountain Glaciers in the Anthropocene: A Report by the Working Group Commissioned by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences", May 11, 2011 <http://www.casinapioiv.va/content/dam/accademia/pdf/glaciers.pdf>
- ¹² Pope Benedict XVI, "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation" (Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2010), www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace_en.html.
- ¹³ Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap, "Cool Dudes: The Denial of Climate Change Among Conservative White Males in the United States," *Global Environmental Change* 21, no. 4 (2011), pp. 1163–72.
- ¹⁴ Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species*, ch. 4.
- ¹⁵ Maxwell T. Boykoff and Joe Smith, "Media Presentations of Climate Change," in Constance Lever-Tracy, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Climate Change and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 210–18.
- ¹⁶ Renée Lertzman, "The Myth of Apathy," *Ecologist*, June 19, 2008.
- ¹⁷ Shelley Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).