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Summary of "a perfect moral storm: climate change, intergenerational ethics and the problem of moral corruption," a paper by Stephan Gardiner

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Summary of "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption," A Paper By Stephan Gardiner

By Joshua Kurdys on October 18, 2009 2:27 AM| 3 Comments

Editor's Note: The following post is a summary of a paper written by Stephen Gardiner on how the complexity of climate change issues leads to failure to accept this civilization challenging problem's full moral dimensions. ClimateEthics frequently summarizes important papers on climate change ethics. The Gardiner paper raises important issues not previously considered by ClimateEthics.

I. A Perfect Moral Storm.

In his recent article "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption," Stephen Gardiner shows that the complexity of climate change contributes to the underestimation of its moral significance. To illustrate the difficulties of comprehending the ethical duties invoked by climate change, Gardiner uses the image of a "perfect storm." This image allows him to examine the problem in the distinct but related dimensions of its global impact, its intergenerational or historical impact and the theoretical complexity produced by the interaction of these distinct dimensions. While analyzing moral responsibility in each separate dimension poses its own set of challenges, combining both dimensions and gauging the impact of their collusion plainly exceeds the sophistication of current theoretical models, thereby inviting convenient delusions that alternately exaggerate or undervalue climate change. Instead of allowing us to evaluate climate change in terms of its complex reality, the combination of global, temporal and theoretical "storms" threatens to compromise the moral integrity of would-be respondents, thereby compounding rather than elucidating the problem.

Viewed individually, the component "storms" of climate change constitute problems whose solutions may be difficult to articulate and implement. They do not represent insoluble problems. The global storm of climate change questions the basis for collective action in responding to the effects of climate change. Because climate change involves the emissions of many nations who neither suffer nor benefit equally from their effects, individual interests often obscure the collective effects of emissions. In the absence of a linear connection between local greenhouse gas emissions by individual agents and the cumulative, global effects of those emissions, a veneer of uncertainty obscures individual responsibility for climate change and creates a wedge between individual and collective interests. While correlations between cumulative emissions rates and global climate change demonstrate a basis for collective responsibility, uncertainty permits individuals to deny their direct responsibility, suggesting that individuals might have material reasons for evading contributions to collective action.

Though by no means unproblematic, the conceptual basis for the nation state may provide an institutional model that reconciles individual and collective interests. Historically, the power of national government derives from the need to reconcile individual self-interest with the collective need for security. Though long underlying the theory of the nation state, the power to enforce individual commitments to collective action desperately needed to address the problem of climate change is curiously absent from existing international institutions. With this absence, a relatively simple conceptual problem regarding disputes between individual and collective interests goes unresolved for a lack of means. In the face of still greater conceptual challenges, the lack of collective will to the address conceptual challenges we do comprehend hints at the danger of moral corruption Gardiner cites in the conclusion to his analysis.

While the conceptual solution to the global storm leaves out important details regarding the global institutions it recommends, such a solution effectively identifies a means for mediating between differences of individual and collective interest in the absence of inter-generational obligations. Demonstrating the inter-generational basis for collective interest becomes a much more difficult task because the individuals causing historical greenhouse gas emissions have no way of experiencing the effects of climate change. If we recognize that the lifespan of greenhouse gas

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emissions is at least 100 to 120 years, with upward measurements ranging on the order of millennia, we can see that those responsible for emissions in 1909, for example, have no sense of the consequences of their behavior. In the absence of any recognizable threat from emissions, the request that emissions be curbed appears as an unjust and capricious restriction on industrial development that hampers the wellbeing of developing nations. Viewed from the standpoint of emitters and using the longer timeframe of millennia suggested by some research, our dawning consciousness of the effects of climate change today has little to say about the effects of greenhouse gas emissions in thousands of years and so these hypothetical effects fail to move the needle on public policy because the inter-generational magnitude of climate change seems so insubstantial.

These are absurd scenarios. Unlike the developing industrial powers of a century ago, developing countries of today know about the actual and predicted effects of greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, many policy-makers express nominal concern for the future effects of climate change even though their interest is limited to the next election cycle rather than the order of generations. Yet, ignoring the fact of generational overlap allows analysis to isolate three distinct factors, significant within an inter-generational interpretation, which a temporally static, global account of climate change omits. First, viewed as a "Pure Inter-generational Problem," the harms produced by one generation are not experienced, even as an indirect global effect, by that same generation. Consequently, by the time effects of climate change become noticeable, significant damage has already occurred, causing remediation efforts lag far behind the inter-generational causes of climate change. Second, since becoming nominally aware of climate change in the 1970s, few comprehensive remediation strategies have been enacted. Consequently, greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, leading to a significant back-loading of mitigation efforts. As a result of the lag between the time we become aware of specific effects of climate change and the time comprehensive remediation strategies can implement mitigation efforts, which are already back-loaded, new consequences have already changed the cost and scope of mitigation efforts. Due to the combination of these first two factors, information lag and strategic back-loading, the third distinctively inter-generational consequence of climate change involves the recognition that the effects of current actions are substantially deferred.

The deferral of currant attempts to affect climate change compounds the problem of plausible deniability that affects individual agents' estimation of their global and inter-generational responsibilities because the utility of these strategies will not appear until well in the future, while their costs will become apparent immediately. Deferral alters the stakes of the challenge posed by climate change because the superimposition of the global and temporal dimensions of the problem creates an apparent incentive for uncertainty and delay. Yet, just as the effectiveness of remediation strategies will not appear for some time, it is equally certain that the costs of delay compound the effects of climate change in two distinct ways: First, present uncertainty strains attempts to convince individual actors of their collective obligations in the global dimension. Second, the temporal effect of delay caused by scientific uncertainty multiplies the effects of climate change given the progressive arrangement of inter-generational contributions to climate change.

Nevertheless, successfully identifying the exacerbating factors involved in global considerations and the multiplier effects of temporal considerations provides no assurance that we possess the theoretical tools to grapple with the simultaneous articulation of global and temporal factors one upon the other. Gardiner identifies our theoretical ineptitude as the third storm, in addition to the global and temporal storms identified previously, not only because it raises explicit questions about our ability to comprehend the complexity of climate change, but also because it points out the danger of moral corruption in the face of that complexity. Coming to terms with this complexity involves not only identifying the individual global and temporal components of climate change, but how aspects common to both, scientific uncertainty for example, introduce a deceptive simplicity that compromises efforts to develop an adequate response based on an honest understanding of the problem.

In conclusion, moral corruption constitutes a significant threat because it permits self-deception by selectively applying our attention to components of climate change that ease our moral burden. Practically, moral corruption emerges in beliefs that excuse inaction with claims of scientific uncertainty and exorbitant economic or political costs while ignoring signs that encourage action such as scientific consensus and the mounting inter-generational costs of inaction to be borne by future generations. Theoretically, moral corruption appears in the self-interested choice of strategies we select in responding to climate change by emphasizing the self-interested obligations for collective action suggested by the global effects of climate change without evaluating these strategies according to inter-generational standards requiring ethical commitments that go beyond contemporary preferences. In contrast to the practical effects of moral corruption, which play on the division between interests for self and other, the theoretical implication of moral corruption suggests that the way we constitute the distinction between individual and collective interests may render a theoretically adequate balance between personal and political obligations, while effectively abandoning questions of responsibility to innocent generations to come.

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References:

Gardiner, Stephen M. "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption." Environmental Values 15, no.3 (August 2006) 397-413

Tags: climate change complexity and ethics, climate change ethics, individual versus national ethical responsibility, intergeneraltional equity, responsibility for climate change, scientific uncertainty and ethics

3 COMMENTS

Ken Wilson | October 18, 2009 5:34 PM | Reply

Summarizing Mr. Gardiner's paper is, in an of itself, quite an undertaking. By inference, Mr. Gardiner, himself, takes for granted that we've caused climate change (CC), hence should be able to reverse or stabilize it. (Can't help recalling a hoary anecdote about the Cambridge (MA) city council's response to citizen complaints about the city's failure to clear the streets of snow: God put it there,so let Him take it away).

He also presumably "knows", in some rigorous sense of that term, what the average global temperature (AGT) is, how it is observed and assessed, when such observations and assessments began, the number and location of official "climate stations" worldwide, the organizations or agencies ultimately responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting; also is able to differentiate. with a satisfactory degree of reliability, environmental effects due to normal variation from effects due specifically to climate change (without regard to causation).

Most folks, including yours truly, don't know what he presumably knows. Perhaps if those who "run" with CC, especially the anthropogenic variety, had spent more time trying to impart knowledge of the variables suggested illustratively above, the general public might be more inclined to "believe" what the "anointed" take for granted.

Again, a good job of summarization.

Marie Devine | November 13, 2009 4:31 PM | Reply

A Better Solution - A Different Direction

The goal is survival, food and good health.
The goal is not investment, opportunities, and new technology.

There is no need for a UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December. They have no power to implement change and they only have a draft without details on how to proceed.
On Sept 24, 2009 Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader reminded the world that when the nations signed the UN Preamble, details had to be filled in later. The later details did not line up with what the nations signed on to. It will be the same with this treaty.

http://thepostnemail.wordpress.com/2009/11/13/briston-univ-study-contradicts-fundamental-tenents-of-copenhagen-treaty/#comment-2407
This agrees with a NOVA program.
This climate change agreement cannot change the problem of climate change because they see the problem as CO2. NOVA had a program a number of years ago that if the sun and moon were a little closer, it would dramatically increase the C02 and you would almost be able to watch things grow, they would grow so fast. By reducing C02 it would decrease the growing capacity of the earth and we would die quickly from starvation at least.

It takes more polluting energy to create green technology and transport all the parts around the world. It would not reduce the cost of energy, it would only change who was paid for it. Most people, especially in a financial crisis will not be able to afford the new technologies. The plan is well-intentioned, but has no positive affect.

The surest, easiest, quickest, fairest, most beautiful and least expensive solution is to turn from the employment lifestyle that is destroying the air, land, water and food making the people and the earth diseased. We can solve the world problems at the same time we turn to a garden paradise lifestyle with trees, plants and pets that provide fresh food around us. God promises rain in due season and good health and peace for animals and people if they follow His wisdom. Leviticus 26

Money and jobs are the obstacles to choosing the only sustainable solution. We cannot build the undeveloped world into even a small town 1800 lifestyle, but we can show them a garden paradise lifestyle that they can all rejoice in. It will be an answer to the expected extinction of humanity and a joy in ending the oppression and stress of the employment lifestyle for those who have been stuck in it The garden paradise lifestyle ends the problem; it does not delay it. It obviously will work; the only question is, Are we willing to retire?

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Marie Devine
http://www.divine-way.com
God has solutions to world problems we created by ignoring His wisdom.

dennis baker | February 11, 2010 7:32 PM | Reply

dennisbaker2003(at)hotmail.com
RE : The solution to climate change.
(human excrement + nuclear waste = hydrogen)
The USA discharges Trillions of tons of sewage annually, sufficient quantity to sustain electrical generation requirements of the USA.
Redirecting existing sewage systems to containment facilities would be a considerable infrastructure modification project.
It is the intense radiation that causes the conversion of organic material into hydrogen, therefore what some would consider the most dangerous waste because of its radiation would be the best for this utilization.
I believe the combination of clean water and clean air, will increase the life expectancy of humans.
The four main areas of concern globally are energy, food,water and air!
The radiologic decomposing of organic materials generates Hydrogen
By using our sewage as a source of energy we also get clean air , clean water, and no ethanol use of food stocks. Eat food first, create energy after.
Simply replacing the fossil fuel powered electrical generating facilities with these plants, would reduce CO2 emissions, and CH4 emissions, to acceptable levels, globally.
This would require a completely new reactor facility capable of converting human waste into hydrogen and then burning the hydrogen to generate electricity on site.
This solution is sellable to citizens because of all the side issue solutions. I've been able to convince most simply with concept of using nuclear waste to a productive end.
Superbugs (antibiotic resistant) apparently are created in the waters sewage is discharged into, which is one more side issue solution.
Anything not converting into hydrogen will potentially be disposed of using Transmutation.
The water emitted from hydrogen burning will have uses in leaching heavy metals from other contaminated site clean ups.
I thank you for your consideration, please feel free to contact me anytime.
Dennis Baker

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