

The Problem of Political Inertia by Stephen M. Gardiner (2010)

Note: This is an excerpt from, “Is ‘Arming the Future’ With Geoengineering Really the Lesser Evil?” which you will read in full during week 15

“The rise in global carbon dioxide emissions last year outpaced international researchers’ most dire projections ...” – Juliet Eilperin (2008)

Crutzen asserts that, despite the fact that mitigation is “by far the preferred way” to address climate change, so far efforts to lower carbon dioxide emissions have been “grossly unsuccessful”. The grounds for Crutzen’s skepticism are easy to see. Since 1990, when the threat of global climate change was firmly established by the first report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, humanity’s overall response to climate change has been pretty disappointing. One sign of this is that both global emissions and the emissions of most major countries, such as the United States, have been increasing steadily during this period. For example, from 1990-2005, global emissions rose by almost thirty percent (from 6164 to 7985 million metric tons of carbon), and U.S. emissions by just over twenty percent. Another sign is that global emissions have been growing even more rapidly in the recent past (from an average of 1.5-2% per annum to around 3% in 2007). Indeed, this growth is so rapid that they are currently at the very high end of projected emissions given back in 1990. Given such inertia, Crutzen infers that “there is little reason to be optimistic” about future reductions; indeed, he asserts that the hope that the world will now act decisively is “a pious wish”.

If political inertia is the key problem, what causes it? Crutzen does not say. However, in my own view, a good part of the explanation is that global climate change constitutes “a perfect moral storm”: the convergence of three nasty challenges (or “storms”) that threaten our ability to behave ethically. These three storms arise in the global, intergenerational and theoretical dimensions.

The global challenge is familiar. Both the sources and the effects of anthropogenic emissions are spread throughout the world, across local, national, and regional boundaries. According to many writers, this creates a tragedy of the commons situation, because the global system is not currently set up to govern this kind of commons. Worse, there are skewed vulnerabilities: those who are most vulnerable and least responsible will probably bear the brunt, at least in the short- to medium-term. This is because whereas the developed nations are, by and large, responsible for the bulk of emissions to this point, they appear much less vulnerable to the more immediate impacts than the less developed countries, where most of the world’s poor reside. This mismatch of vulnerability and responsibility is exacerbated by the fact that the developed countries are more powerful politically, and so more capable of bringing about a solution, but the less developed are poorly placed to call them to account.

The intergenerational challenge is less familiar. The impacts of climate change are subject to major time lags, implying that a large part of the problem is passed on to the future. One reason for this is that emissions of the main anthropogenic greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, persist in the atmosphere for very long periods of time: even the typical carbon dioxide molecule remains for several hundred years, but 10-15% remains for ten thousand years, and 7% for one hundred thousand years. Given this, the full cost of any given generation's emissions will not be realized during that generation's lifetime. This suggests that each generation faces the temptation of intergenerational buck-passing: it can benefit from passing on the costs and/or harms of its behavior to future people, even when this is morally unjustified. Moreover, if the behavior of a given generation is primarily driven by its concerns about what happens during its own lifetime, then such overconsumption is likely.

The third challenge is theoretical. We do not yet have a good understanding of many of the ethical issues at stake in global warming policy. For example, we lack compelling approaches to issues such as scientific uncertainty, international justice, intergenerational justice, and the appropriate form of human relationships to animals and the rest of nature. This causes special difficulties given the presence of the other storms. In particular, given the intergenerational storm and the problem of skewed vulnerabilities, each generation of the affluent is susceptible to arguments for inaction (or inappropriate action) that shroud themselves in moral language but are actually weak, and self-deceptive. In other words, each generation of the affluent is vulnerable to moral corruption: if they give undue priority to what happens within their own lifetimes, they will welcome ways to justify overconsumption, and so give less scrutiny than they ought to arguments that license it. Such corruption is easily facilitated by the theoretical storm, and obscured by other features of the global storm.

Since the perfect moral storm makes us vulnerable to moral corruption, we should be on our guard.