

SYMPOSIUM
A CHANGING MORAL CLIMATE



THE HEART OF
A PERFECT MORAL STORM

A PRÉCIS BY STEPHEN GARDINER

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The Heart of *A Perfect Moral Storm*

Stephen Gardiner

A *Perfect Moral Storm* is a long book, and contains extended discussions of many issues. It is therefore difficult to summarize without losing much of its content. In this brief Précis, I provide a broad overview of the basic message of the book, and then highlight some key parts that may be of particular interest to some readers.¹

I

The Central Message

Sometimes the best way to make progress on a problem is to get clearer on what that problem is. Arguably, the biggest issue facing humanity at the moment is the looming global

¹ Some of this material also appears in Stephen M. Gardiner, “The Ethical Dimension of Tackling Climate Change,” *Yale Environment* 360 (2011). Available at:

http://e360.yale.edu/feature/the_ethical_dimension_of_tackling_climate_change/2456/

environmental crisis. Here, the problem is not that we are unaware that trouble is coming. The basic science is both well-known, and continually being reiterated in major national and international reports. Instead, the core problem is that thus far effective action seems beyond us. We seem at best paralyzed, and at worst indifferent. Put starkly, there seems little place within our grand institutions and busy lives for what may turn out to be the defining issue of our generation.

In my view, a central part of the explanation for this is the fact that humanity is in the grip of a profound ethical challenge that our current institutions and theories are ill-equipped to meet. Sebastian Junger's book *The Perfect Storm* tells the story of a fishing boat caught at sea during the rare convergence of three independently powerful storms. Similarly, the global environmental crisis brings together three major challenges to ethical action, and in a mutually reinforcing way. Climate change is a paradigm example. It is genuinely global, profoundly intergenerational, and occurs in a setting where we lack robust theory and institutions to guide us. Neglect of this perfect moral storm leads us to underestimate the climate problem and fail to appreciate the wider implications in predictable ways.

Conventional wisdom (especially in the most influential arenas of environmental policy, international relations and economics) identifies climate change as primarily a global problem, and so emphasizes the spatial dispersion of causes and effects. Wherever they originate, emissions of the main greenhouse gas (carbon dioxide) quickly become mixed in the atmosphere, affecting climate everywhere. According to the standard analysis, this makes climate change a traditional tragedy of the commons, played out between nation states that (it is tacitly assumed) represent the interests of their citizens in perpetuity. In Garrett Hardin's tragedy, each herdsman prefers the collective outcome

where none overconsume, so that the commons is not overburdened. Nevertheless, when acting individually each prefers to overconsume himself, no matter what the others do, with ruinous results for all. In climate change, we are often told, states reason in the same way. Each prefers the collective outcome where none overconsume carbon emissions—so that dangerous climate change is avoided. Yet, when acting individually, each prefers to overconsume, no matter what the others do—so overconsumption is rife. In both cases, then, we are led to an outcome that no one wants, and which is severe enough to be called tragic.

Unfortunately, this traditional model is at best dangerously incomplete. To begin with, it ignores one central spatial aspect of the climate problem. Those least responsible for past emissions are likely to suffer the most serious impacts (at least in the short- to medium-term). This is partly because the poorer nations are disproportionately located in more climate-sensitive regions, but it is also because, being poor, they lack the resources available to the rich to address negative impacts. Since it ignores this basic problem of fairness, the traditional model underestimates the nature of the relevant “tragedy.”

Even more importantly, the traditional model obscures the temporal aspect of the perfect moral storm. Once emitted, a substantial proportion of climate emissions typically remain in the atmosphere for hundreds of years, and some persist for tens—even hundreds—of thousands. This means that the current generation takes benefits now, but spreads the costs of its behavior far into the future. Worse, many of these benefits are comparatively modest (e.g., those of bigger and more powerful vehicles), and many of the projected costs are severe, even catastrophic (e.g., severe flooding and famine). Worse still, the problem is iterated: the same temptation to take modest benefits

now even in the face of severe costs to the future is repeated for subsequent generations as they come to hold the reins of power. Hence, there are compounded cumulative impacts further in the future, making catastrophe more likely. Worst of all, such impacts may eventually provoke the equivalent of an intergenerational arms race. Perhaps some future generations will face such appalling environmental conditions that they are entitled to emit more in self-defense, even foreseeing that this behavior makes matters even worse for their successors. And so it goes on.

The shape of the temporal storm suggests that, rather than a traditional tragedy of the commons played out between nation states, we face a problem that I call the *tyranny of the contemporary* played out between and across generations. One fault of the conventional wisdom is thus to misdiagnose the policy challenge, which it does largely by assuming it away through the tacit and undefended assumption that nation states can be relied upon to adequately represent the interests of future as well as current citizens. Thus, what is needed is a *conceptual paradigm shift* away from the traditional tragedy of the commons and towards the tyranny of the contemporary and the wider perfect moral storm. This is true not just for climate change, but also more widely.

One reason that a paradigm shift is important is that continued misdiagnosis is likely to lead to bad policy. The tyranny of the contemporary is harder to resolve than the traditional tragedy of the commons, and solutions to the latter do not automatically carry over. Moreover, the dominant contemporary institutions (such as the market and short-term election cycles) were not designed with it in mind, and indeed seem to positively encourage it. Thus, the tyranny of the contemporary poses a major challenge.

A third storm exacerbates the situation. Climate change brings together many areas in which our best theories are far from

robust, such as intergenerational ethics, global justice, scientific uncertainty, and humanity's relationship to nature. The problem here is not that we do not have any guidance at all. (For instance, the basic ethical intuition that imposing catastrophe on the future for the sake of modest benefits to ourselves is indefensible seems relatively secure.) Instead, the problem is that it is difficult to move beyond such basic intuitions, and that without the backing of robust theories we are too easily distracted by spurious counterarguments, especially from theories that have merits in other contexts, but fail to take the future seriously enough. For instance, some influential economists claim that the current generation is justified in moving slowly on climate change because future people will be richer due to economic growth, and so should pay more. However, when subject to critical scrutiny this argument quickly seems overly simplistic and complacent. Are we really entitled to *assume* that the future will be richer even in a climate catastrophe? Even if they are, why should they pay to clean up our mess?

This worry about distraction leads to a further important result. The intersection of the global, intergenerational and theoretical storms threatens to undermine the integrity of public discourse. We in the current generation—and especially the more affluent - are in a position to continue exploiting our strategic advantages (e.g., by taking modest benefits for ourselves that impose risks of catastrophe on future people). However, recognizing that we are doing so is morally uncomfortable. Better, then, to cover it up with clever but shallow arguments that distort public discussion, and solutions that do little to get at the core problems. After all, most of the victims are poorly placed to hold us to account - being very poor, not yet born, or nonhuman.

Unfortunately, there is ample evidence for both forms of corruption in the case of climate policy. On the one hand, public

discussion does seem distorted. Persistent extreme skepticism about climate science and the motives of scientists abounds, as does a determined focus on scientific, technological and narrowly economic questions.

On the other hand, despite some noble efforts, international climate policy has thus far yielded only a succession of “shadow solutions” to the climate problem: processes, proposals and agreements that pay lip service to wider ideals but ultimately deliver very little in the way of substance. For instance, by 1994 all major countries including the United States had ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and so agreed to “protect the climate system for present and future generations.” However, global emissions are now up more than 40% since 1990. Similarly, in 2009 in Copenhagen the global community publicly committed itself to limiting global temperature rise to 2 degrees Celsius. However, it left the hard question of who should do what to a subsequent national pledge system that does not get close to that target, and few have any confidence will actually be implemented. Moreover, the negotiations since Copenhagen have largely continued this pattern.² Alas, given the temptations of the global and intergenerational storms, such dithering is all too predictable, and highly convenient.

As bad as this news is, there may be worse to come. A buck-passing strategy need not limit itself merely to inaction and distraction, but rather should be expected to evolve over time. Given this, as the overall situation worsens, we might predict that the current generation will begin to press for a quick technological fix to hold off the worst impacts, at least until after

² We see headlines such as “Cancún deal leaves hard climate tasks to Durban summit in 2011” (*Guardian*, 14 December 2010), followed by “Durban Climate Deal Impossible Say US and EU Envoys” (*Guardian*, 18 April 2011).

they have exited the scene. Better yet, in doing so they might strive to seize the ethical high ground by declaring such a fix a “necessary” and “lesser” evil to prevent climate catastrophe. (Implausible? Welcome to the emerging debate about geoengineering.)

This is a grim state of affairs. However, recognizing the shape of the perfect moral storm can help us to make progress. We face a profound global and intergenerational challenge that current institutions and theories were not designed to meet. Given this, we need to move beyond the short-term economic and geopolitical framings that dominate current public discussion. We must acknowledge the global and intergenerational power that we yield, and take responsibility for it, rather than taking solace in comfortable distraction. No one will stop us from exploiting that power but us. This is why ethics is at the heart of the matter.

II

Key Points

As we have just seen, the central message of *A Perfect Moral Storm* is that humanity currently faces a distinctive kind of ethical challenge and climate change is a paradigm example. Let me offer a brief outline of the parts, and highlight some key points.

Part A offers an overview of the perfect moral storm analysis. Chapter 1 presents the basic metaphor, distinguishes its main elements, and explains why these are especially problematic in the case of climate change. Chapter 2 discusses the different motivational assumptions that might drive the storm, and explains my own institutional approach. According to this view, we currently lack effective institutions to translate genuine

intergenerational (as well as global and ecological) concern into effective policy. In this chapter, I also criticize some “green energy revolution” arguments and highlight a further morally salient alternative to the idea that the perfect moral storm involves the ruthless exploitation of self-interest, namely that to some extent it may rest on more superficial and in some ways incompetent behaviors that seem more morally pathetic than evil.

Part B discusses the global storm by considering two popular but competing diagnoses of the structure of the current international problem. According to the optimistic analysis (represented by its proponents through a simple ‘Battle of the Sexes’ model from game theory), addressing climate change does not really require truly global cooperation, but only that of a substantial, “critical mass” of countries. According to a more pessimistic analysis (represented through prisoner’s dilemma and tragedy of the commons models), truly global cooperation is necessary. I argue that the facts of climate change make the optimistic analysis largely untenable for the global storm considered as such, and in ways that support the more pessimistic case. However, I go on to claim that, though there are important differences between the prisoner’s dilemma and tragedy of the commons models, either way the more pessimistic analysis is itself not bleak enough, since it neglects the background presence of the intergenerational storm. As a result, we might expect nations to indulge in a modest “wait and see” policy that focuses on only short- to medium-term concerns. Unfortunately, we see evidence for such “shadow solutions” in the history of global climate policy, and especially in the Kyoto and Copenhagen frameworks. Interestingly, their existence may help to explain the initial appeal of the optimistic ‘battle of the sexes’ analysis.

Part C considers the intergenerational storm more directly, and constitutes the theoretical heart of the book. Chapter 5 sets out

the basic structure of the intergenerational problem, suggesting that it operates at various social levels. It also offers views about why generations as such are an important normative category, why we should not expect either an invisible hand or generational overlap to solve the problem, and why the philosophical nonidentity problem does not overwhelm either the climate case or the relevance of the tyranny of the contemporary more generally.³

Chapter 6 assesses whether the application of the tyranny of the contemporary analysis to climate change is undermined by the possibility that severe impacts may be imminent: if catastrophe is coming soon, the thought goes, doesn't the intergenerational problem disappear? I argue that it does not, and moreover that (counterintuitively) the temporal proximity of major negative impacts may make matters worse, even perhaps to the extent of setting off the equivalent of an intergenerational arms race.

Part D discusses the theoretical dimension of the perfect moral storm. Chapter 7 introduces a global test for political institutions and moral and political theories, and argues that we have strong grounds for thinking that current versions of both are failing this test. It also suggests that theories can be opaque, complacent, and evasive in the face of serious problems, and that this is a live worry in the case of climate change. Chapter 8 offers as an example of these problems attempts to apply economic cost-benefit analysis, the leading public policy tool of the day, to climate change. Such analysis is often criticized by philosophers and environmentalists; but in the present case, it also comes under pressure from many of its usual supporters.

Part E discusses the problem of moral corruption. Chapter 9 explains the basic problem and then illustrates its relevance

³ The latter is taken up more fully elsewhere (see Gardiner 2009).

through a disturbing comparison of some of the public debate about climate change with a paradigm case discussed by Jane Austen in *Sense and Sensibility*. The idea is that there are strong parallels between Austen's arguments and ours, and both are wrong for similar reasons. This should trouble us. No morally serious agent would want to be portrayed as the Austen parallel suggests.

Chapter 10 considers how the problem of moral corruption may evolve over time, as climate change progresses. It does so by exploring how the perfect storm analysis might illuminate some recent arguments for the pursuit of geoengineering. In addition, it assesses what might be at stake in the debate about whether geoengineering should be pursued as a "lesser evil", including different meanings of 'evil'. In particular, it highlights a concern for *tarnishing and marring evils* that casts further light on the ethical challenge of the perfect storm.

Part F brings the book to a close. Chapter 11 introduces the important idea of an ethics of the transition, and takes some steps towards one through commenting on some basic concerns about scientific uncertainty, precautionary action, responsibility for past emissions, the allocation of future emissions, and the shape of individual responsibility. Chapter 12 summarizes the main claims of the book, and says something about the prospects for the immediate future. Appendix 1 considers and rejects Garrett Hardin's identification of the global environmental tragedy with world population growth. Appendix 2 illustrates how we may be vulnerable to epistemic as well as moral corruption through a discussion of three of Michael Crichton's claims in the author's message accompanying his novel *State of Fear*.

In my view, *A Perfect Moral Storm* introduces a number of distinctive ideas which, though they remain (deliberately) underdeveloped, are worth highlighting and pursuing further.

These include the notions of: the ethics of the transition (chapter 11), an intergenerational arms race (chapter 6), marring and tarnishing evils (chapter 10), moral corruption (chapter 9), shadow solutions (chapter 4, 10), theoretical complacency and other vices (chapter 7). Specific discussions which also seem distinctive and to have gathered some attention include those of: the Austen analogy (chapter 9), economic discounting (chapter 8), epistemic corruption (appendix 2), and Hardin's view of population ethics (appendix 1). Some of these ideas are developed more fully in the many other papers on climate ethics I have written that are not represented in *A Perfect Moral Storm*. Some of these other pieces develop some of my specific views on topics such as the role of virtue, responsibility, precaution, and human rights.

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