

SYMPOSIUM  
A CHANGING MORAL CLIMATE



JACK, JILL, AND JANE  
IN A PERFECT MORAL STORM

BY DALE JAMIESON

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# Jack, Jill, and Jane in a Perfect Moral Storm

Dale Jamieson

Stephen Gardiner's *A Perfect Moral Storm* is a wonderful book. It goes a long way towards explaining why we have failed to act on climate change. I agree almost entirely with its broad conclusions and with most of its specific claims. The author and I are comrades in the struggle, and like-minded in the ways that matter most. Still, there is an important difference between us. I do not want to overstate this difference nor exaggerate its significance. However, I believe that articulating this difference can help clarify why moral arguments have largely failed to move us to respond to climate change.

Gardiner and I agree that our response to climate change constitutes a “profound ethical failure” but we disagree about the nature of this failure.<sup>1</sup> Gardiner thinks that we have moral norms and concepts that apply that we are not living up to. Thus we are the proper subjects of moral condemnation. He charges us with “willful self-deception and moral corruption”(11). I do not deny that with respect to some of our climate change contributing behavior there are applicable moral norms which we fail to live

<sup>1</sup> The quoted words are from the flyleaf of Stephen M. Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Parenthetical page references are to this book.

up to, and that willful self-deception and moral corruption are to some extent involved in our contributions to climate change as they are in many other areas of life. My claim is that with much of our practical reason, both moral and prudential, we do not have adequate norms and values that motivate us to address climate change. This is a “profound ethical failure”—or to use another of Gardiner’s descriptions, a “tragedy”—but it is not the same kind of failure or tragedy as failing to live up to one’s principles. In my opinion, the really profound moral challenge of climate change consists in formulating and implementing new moral norms and concepts that are adequate to the problems we face in this unprecedented period in human history.

In the next section I present an analogy that is intended to help explain why we do not see many acts that contribute to climate change as presenting serious moral challenges. I then respond to Gardiner’s criticisms of my use of this analogy. In the following section I discuss an analogy that Gardiner has offered between a case drawn from Jane Austin’s novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, and some challenges that we face with respect to climate change. Finally, I draw some conclusions.

## I

### **Jack and Jill**

Most of the time we do not subject people’s actions to moral evaluation. This may be because we consider most of what people do to be ‘their business,’ belonging to a private sphere that is beyond the reach of morality. Or it may be because we regard most of what people do to be morally permissible. Generally our moral thinking only consciously engages when something strikes

us as not quite right. There are also acts that come to our attention because they are morally exemplary or ‘beyond the call of duty,’ but these occur less frequently than the feeling that something has gone wrong. Various moral theorists would like to dislodge this way of seeing things, but nevertheless this is more or less the view that is embedded in common sense morality. When it comes to acts, the most fundamental distinction in our prevailing moral consciousness is between those that are morally suspect and those that are not, and we see most of what people do as in some way for some reason outside the domain of moral evaluation.

A paradigm of an act that is morally suspect is one that has the following characteristics. An individual acting intentionally harms another individual; both the individuals and the harm are identifiable; and the individuals and the harm are closely related in time and space.

Consider an example.<sup>2</sup> Suppose that Jill has parked her bicycle on the porch of her house and then gone inside to make dinner. Jack, who has been looking for a bicycle to steal, sees Jill’s bicycle on the porch, cuts the lock, and rides off. The following is an apt characterization of this case:

1. Jack intentionally steals Jill’s bicycle.

<sup>2</sup> I introduced these cases in “The Moral and Political Challenges of Climate Change,” in *Creating a Climate for Change: Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change*, edited by S. Moser and L. Dilling (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 475-482, and discussed them further in *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—And What It Means for Our Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). These examples were inspired by J. Glover, “‘It Makes No Difference Whether or Not I Do It,’” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes 49 (1975), 171-209.

In this case Jack intentionally acts in such a way as to knowingly harm another individual.<sup>3</sup> Both the perpetrator and victim (Jack and Jill) are clearly identifiable, and they are closely related in time and space. This case is a clear candidate for moral evaluation, and most of us would resoundingly say that what Jack did was wrong.

Consider, however, what happens when we alter the case along various dimensions. We may still see the case as a candidate for moral evaluation but its claim to be a paradigm weakens. Consider the following examples:

2. Jack is part of an unacquainted group of strangers, each of which, acting independently, takes one part of Jill's bicycle, resulting in the bicycle's disappearance.
3. Jack takes one part from each of a large number of bicycles, one of which belongs to Jill.
4. Jack and Jill live on different continents, and the loss of Jill's bicycle is the consequence of a causal chain that begins with Jack ordering a used bicycle at a shop.
5. Jack lives many centuries before Jill, and consumes materials that are essential to bicycle manufacturing; as a result, it will not be possible for Jill to have a bicycle.

In 2 we transform the agent who harms Jill into an unstructured collective. In 3 we reduce the amount of harm that

<sup>3</sup> There are some ambiguities about intentional action so let me stipulate the following. When I say that an agent intentionally *phi*s, I will mean that the agent acted intentionally and that *phi*-ing would be a reasonable description of the act from the agent's point of view whether or not the agent acted under that description.

Jack causes Jill to a minimum. In 4 we disrupt the spatial contiguity between Jack and Jill and cancel Jack's *mens rea*.<sup>4</sup> In 5 we cancel Jack's *mens rea* and also disrupt the temporal contiguity between Jack and Jill. Each case, I claim, is less of a paradigm for moral evaluation than Case 1. Indeed, some would not see anything morally questionable about Jack's actions in 4 and 5. 2 and 3 may still be seen as candidates for moral evaluation, but less obviously so than 1. People who see Jack's action as wrong in 2 and 3 are likely to see it as less wrong than in 1.

Now consider Example 6 which incorporates all of the changes serially considered in examples 2-5.

6. Acting independently, Jack and a large number of unacquainted people set in motion a chain of events that causes a large number of future people who will live in another part of the world from ever having bicycles.

For many people this is just an abstract description of normal, everyday behavior. There is nothing suspect about it at all. For other people the perception persists that there is something morally questionable about this case. This is because what some people take to be at the center of a moral problem persists: some people have acted in a way that harms other people. However, most of what typically accompanies this core has disappeared, and this is why some people do not see this case as presenting a moral problem. Even for those who do see this case as presenting a moral problem, the wrongness of the acts and the culpability of the agents are greatly diminished in comparison to Example 1. In Example 6 it is difficult to identify the agents, the victims, and the causal nexus. Nor does it appear that anyone has intentionally

<sup>4</sup> *Mens rea* is Latin for "guilty mind." In many cases it is regarded in the law as a necessary condition for criminal liability.

deprived future people who will live in another part of the world from ever having bicycles. The fact that they will not have bicycles is just a consequence of Jack and others getting on with their lives. In these circumstances it is difficult for the network of moral concepts that involve responsibility and harm to gain traction. In my opinion it is Example 6 that bears the greatest resemblance to the climate change case. If I am right about this then it is not surprising that many people do not see climate change, at least with respect to individual responsibility, as presenting a moral problem.

Stephen Gardiner and others have challenged this analogy.<sup>5</sup> Some of the charges involve claims to the effect that the stakes are much lower in the Jack and Jill case than in the climate change case; that our contributions to climate change involve collective endeavors and not only individual actions; that our reasons for performing acts that contribute to climate change are often much more trivial than Jack's reasons for acting in ways that contribute to future people not having bicycles; that climate change affects present people who are citizens of our own countries and people who are not poor, as well as future people who are citizens of other countries and are poor. Collecting these thoughts Gardiner offers the following analogy which he thinks is closer to the case of individuals acting in a way that contributes to climate change case than my Case 6:

7. George and his buddies like to have big firework displays over the river. These shoot burning debris into the air, predominantly over the poorer neighborhoods on the other side. This has already imposed and continues

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Gardiner, "Is No One Responsible for the Climate Change Tragedy: Climate Change as a Challenge to Our Ethical Concepts," in *The Ethics of Global Climate Change*, edited by D. Arnold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 38-59. Peter Singer and Rebecca Tuvel have also challenged this analogy in talks and unpublished comments.



increasingly to impose, a serious risk on many people in the area that their houses will catch on fire. George and his buddies are aware of this risk, keep saying that they will cut back, buy safer fireworks, contribute funds to the fire department in the poorer neighborhoods, and so on. But they don't. Instead they keep making the displays bigger. They like fireworks. (They could like other things too. But they are used to fireworks.)<sup>6</sup>

Gardiner thinks that “this example conveys a sense of moral severity substantially beyond Jack 6” and that this shows that my claim that “our concepts of individual moral responsibility must be extended or revised requires further defense.”<sup>7</sup>

Gardiner and I agree that the cases that are most analogous to many actions that contribute to climate change (my Case 6, his George 7) are less morally valenced than a paradigm case of moral responsibility (my Case 1, his George 1).<sup>8</sup> What we disagree about is the distance between Case 6 and George 7, and the paradigms of morally valenced acts. I claim that the distance is so great that we tend to see the acts that are most analogous to some of those that contribute to climate change as not morally urgent or perhaps not morally valenced at all. Gardiner, on the other hand, sees these acts as conveying a sense of moral severity, even if not to the same degree as the paradigms.

It is helpful to clarify the disagreements. My claim is not that many of the acts that contribute to climate change are best seen as like Case 6, but rather that through the lens of common sense morality we in fact tend to see these acts as analogous to Case 6. What Gardiner seems most clearly committed to is that we ought

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> In George 1, George steals Sanjay's smoke alarm and then sets fire to Sanjay's house while Sanjay is asleep inside. He does this because he is bored and would like a little excitement.

to see many acts that contribute to climate change as more like his George 7 than my Case 6. Since my claim is about how we tend to see such acts and Gardiner's claim is about how we ought to see them, we do not yet have a disagreement. However, since Gardiner thinks that his George cases undermine my argument he is committed to the claim that we do tend to see some central acts that contribute to climate change as more analogous to George 7 than to my Case 6. This, I think, is incorrect. Although empirical research would be required to show this conclusively, it seems obvious to me that people do not see driving an SUV, overheating a house, or flying in an airplane as like throwing fireworks over poor parts of town. Whatever the weaknesses of my Case 6, it is closer to how most people see some actions that contribute to climate change than George 7.

I am also skeptical about Gardiner's claim that we ought to see such actions as analogous to George 7. George 7 fails to capture the temporal and spatial dislocations, and indirect relations between individual acts that contribute to climate change and climate change damages. Nor are most such acts as gratuitous, well-understood, or inherently risky as shooting burning debris into the air for purposes of entertainment. Still, analogies are not identities and argument can go on indefinitely about which hypothetical cases are the best analogies to various actions.

What is most important is to see that I use the Jack and Jill cases in what is largely an explanatory project. I want to understand why we generally do not see our individual actions that contribute to climate change as morally valenced. It can be asked why we should be interested in this explanatory project. One answer is that insofar as we are interested in understanding and managing the real problem of climate change then appreciating people's actual motivational patterns matters. However, as Gardiner astutely notices, there is another more

fundamental reason why I think this project is important. For me and much of the philosophical tradition, there is a conceptual connection between morality and motivation; the study of one necessarily implicates the other. Defending this claim and spelling out the exact nature of the relations involved are obviously beyond the purview of this paper. Gardiner is right to point out, however, that this commitment is part of what informs my project, and different theoretical starting points might lead one to focus on different questions and assess their significance differently.

## II

### Steve and Jane

In one of the most interesting parts of *A Perfect Moral Storm* Gardiner discusses corruption, a failing that he thinks helps to explain why we pass the costs of our climate changing behavior on to the future, the poor, and nature. He illustrates this failure with an example from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Gardiner's discussion is brilliant, but I am skeptical about the extent to which corruption is central and specific to our failures regarding climate change (indeed, it is not entirely clear how central and specific Gardiner thinks corruption is either) and I also wonder about the aptness of the analogy.

Gardiner's concern with corruption stems from his view that the costs of climate change can be passed to the poor, the future and nature (what he calls "buck-passing"), and that we face strong temptations to do so. He writes that

If we are tempted by buck-passing, but reluctant to face up to moral criticism for succumbing to it [...] we are likely to be attracted to weak or

deceptive arguments that appear on the surface to license such behavior [...] (302).

Gardiner distinguishes “moral corruption” and “corruption of the understanding,” and discusses both “corruption in general” and “moral corruption.” As far as I can see, he doesn’t really provide an explicit account of the distinction between moral corruption and corruption of the understanding, though it is possible to infer one from what he says (I think corruption of the understanding is the susceptibility to bad arguments that he mentions). Gardiner seems skeptical that a “strong philosophical account of corruption” (303) can be given, but nevertheless characterizes what he calls “a core case of corruption”:

the illegitimate taking advantage of a position of superior power for the sake of personal gain (304).

The problem with this characterization is that it is not normally wrong to take “advantage of a position of superior power for the sake of personal gain.” When individuals do this, it is usually regarded as just getting ahead in life. For example, Jack has superior physical power so he becomes a fitness instructor; Jill has superior mathematical power so she becomes a computer scientist. When groups and collectives do this in the political domain, it is simply interest group politics. What distinguishes these from cases of corruption is that they are “legitimate taking(s) of advantage while cases of corruption are illegitimate. Since ‘illegitimate’ is such a general, theory-relative term, this characterization of the core case of corruption seem unilluminating.

When it comes to understanding moral corruption Gardiner turns to Kant:

The thoughts that I take from Kant are [...] that moral corruption is: (a) a tendency to rationalize, which (b) casts doubt on the validity and/or strictness of moral claims, by (c) seeking to pervert their status and substance, and in doing so (d) aims to make those claims better suited to our wishes and inclinations, and (e) destroys the characteristics in virtue of which we respect them (307).

The problem is that Kant (as opposed to some Kantians) actually had very little to say about moral corruption (it comes up mostly in relation to his discussion of “radical evil”). Insofar as Kant has such a notion it seems quite general, most closely connected to the third meaning of ‘corruption’ given in the OED: “moral deterioration or decay; [...] the perversion of anything from an original state of purity [...]. Despoiling of virginity, violation of chastity.”

What I take Kant’s view to be, for what it’s worth, is that the source of corruption is in the clash between inclination and reason, is expressed in overvaluing oneself, and made worse by social conditions, especially war. Gardiner thinks that in some cases of moral corruption “it can, from the external perspective, be difficult to find anyone to blame in the usual way” (307). For Kant it would appear that there would be no problem finding someone to blame in a case of moral corruption: it would be the agent who yields to inclination and overvalues himself. The deepest difference between Kant and Gardiner is that Gardiner is interested in corrupt acts while Kant is interested in corrupt agents.

Although Gardiner recognizes the difficulty and elusiveness of the concept, he wants moral corruption to be a specific enough notion to be explanatory in the climate change case. There is thus a lack of fit between Gardiner’s desire for a concept that is to some extent central and specific to our failures regarding climate change, and Kant’s rather watery notion.

Gardiner wishes to emphasize features of moral corruption that center on our “vulnerability,” susceptibility to “temptation,” and attraction to “weak or deceptive arguments” that serve our interests. These are features that are endemic to being human and it is difficult to see how they are especially explanatory in the climate change case. The antiquity and centrality of temptation in the Judeo-Christian tradition is evidenced by the story of Eve being tempted by the serpent. For that matter it is evidenced by a birthday card that I recently saw that read, “No need to lead me into temptation. I can find it all by myself.”

From my perspective the most important fact with respect to the ethics of climate change is that we do not morally valance many of the actions that contribute to the problem. However, it is true that some actions that contribute to climate change are morally valanced. Let us suppose for present purposes what I do not believe: that all of the following are examples of moral failure with respect to climate change.

A. I know that I ought to stay home and work on my climate change book but my desire to be with my lover wins (again), and instead I fly to Shanghai for the weekend.

B. I know that I ought to cut back on my carbon emissions but I’m not sure by how much and in what ways, so I continue to emit too much.

C. I believe that climate change will be devastating but I could be wrong (maybe the deniers are right, maybe we’ll be saved by some undiscovered feedback in the climate system, maybe adaptation or geoengineering will be successful), so I reduce my emissions a little and feel a little guilty about not reducing more.

D. I was going to ride my bike to school today but it was a little chilly out, so I decided to drive instead.

Notice how easy it is to think of analogues to these cases from other domains:

A') I know that I ought to visit my Aunt but my desire to go surfing wins (again).

B' ) I know that I ought to give more to charity but I'm not sure how much more or to which charities, so I continue to give what I know is too little.

C') I think that I ought to be vegan but I'm not sure that there isn't some argument that I haven't thought of that might relieve me of this obligation, so I'm a little more vegan than I would otherwise be and feel a little guilty when I go for the eggplant parmagian.

D') I set out to volunteer at the soup kitchen, but the bus was late, so I decided not to bother after all.

In some of these cases I know that what I am doing is wrong and I choose to live with the consequences (as some Hollywood vamp said to her weak willed partner, "Do you want to be a good person or do you want to be with me?"). In other cases I try to do what is right but am easily deterred. In still other cases I believe that some act is right but I don't believe it strongly enough to actually do it. We can taxonomize these failings in various ways (akrasia, hypocrisy, bad faith, corruption, and so on). These categorizations can be contested and others proposed, and these or other categorizations may or may not be illuminating

Now consider Gardiner's proposed analogy between our responses to climate change and the case from Jane Austen that he presents. In the Austen case, Henry Dashwood wishes to provide for his second wife and their children after his death, but the terms of his estate require that the estate passes to John, his son by his first wife. On his deathbed Henry extracts a promise from John that he will look after Henry's second wife and their daughters. John promises, apparently sincerely, but under the influence of his wife, Fanny, his resolve continuously weakens in an almost comical way. Ultimately, John does nothing at all to keep the promise.

Gardiner writes:

Our interest lies in Austen's vivid account of how easily John Dashwood moves from accepting a serious and apparently unassailable moral commitment to help his stepmother and half-sisters into dismissing that commitment almost entirely. Her tale illustrates just how seductive and familiar the devices of moral corruption are, and how vulnerable we are to them [...] (310).

The clarity of the Dashwood's [*sic*] folly helps us to see many of the corrupt arguments in the climate debate for the dangerous temptations they are (337).

Gardiner tries to show in detail that the considerations that Fanny adduces against the claim that John owes strong obligations to his stepmother and half-sisters have analogues in the case of climate change contributing behaviors. He characterizes some of Fanny's moves in the following way:

Some of the moves seek to dispute the application of the moral claim (e.g., *Excessive Burden; Prior Entitlement; Competing Special Relationships; Unreasonable Advocates*); others claim that compliance will have unintended bad consequences (e.g., *Opening the Floodgates; Undermining Autonomy*); a third group aims



to reduce the magnitude of the moral demand (e.g., *Budget Constraint; Demanding Mutual Benefit; Diminishing Victims' Needs; Shifting the Playing Field; Blessing in Disguise*); a fourth seeks to undermine the implementation of the duty (e.g., *Onerous Logistics; Discretionary Aid; Indirect Methods*); and a fifth group aims to breed resentment on the part of the duty-bearer (e.g., *Lack of Appreciation; Coveting the Victims' Goods; Recast the Victim*).

This is a terrific analysis of Fanny's rhetoric and arguments, and I agree that many of these arguments have analogues in varying degrees to patterns of thought and argument in the climate change debate. But this is hardly surprising. Fanny's moves are pretty generic and are available in almost any reasonably complex moral argument.

The most striking analogy between climate change and the Austen case is that they both involve intergenerational relationships. It is generally true that moral motivation flags when those to whom obligations are owed are not present, vivid, or causally efficacious. Because climate change is an intergenerational problem this applies dramatically, as Gardiner persuasively argues. However, even though both the Austen and climate change cases can be said to involve intergenerational relationships, this is misleading. In *Sense and Sensibility* the fundamental moral relationships are among Henry and the contemporaneous relatives who outlive him; in the climate change case the basic moral relationship is between us and non-contemporaneous, non-familialy related, future people. As a consequence, unlike future people in the climate change case, the stepmother and half-sisters could at least in principle call John and Fanny to account. This brings out some further differences between the two cases. Much of the argument in *Sense and Sensibility* is in the form of a dialogue while discussion of what we owe future generations in the climate change case is usually

conducted as the third-person. The husband/wife nature of Austen's dialogue contributes to the sense that John is not just trying to figure out the right thing to do, but he is also trying to please Fanny.

Another difference is that John's challenge is to keep a well-understood, widely accepted moral obligation to preserve his father's intentions with respect to the disposition of his property. We understand deathbed promises: that is why Fanny has to work so hard to overturn it, and why the slide into noncompliance is almost funny. In the climate change case it is not so clear what duties we have and to whom. Whatever is true, we have not assumed duties as clearly and explicitly as John has. Indeed, as I have argued, in order to reach the conclusion that we have such duties at least with respect to many actions, we must revise our moral concepts so that we see ourselves as acting wrongly when we engage in apparently innocent activities that make tiny contributions to harms that distant people will suffer centuries from now. This is quite unlike the obligation to keep a deathbed promise, thus fulfilling the intentions of one's father.

I am not convinced that Gardiner has identified a moral failing that is central and specific to our failure to address climate change that can illuminatingly be characterized as moral corruption, especially not one that can be associated with Kant. While an interesting proposal, I am not convinced by the aptness of the analogy between the Austen case and our failure to respond to climate change. Still, we can also learn from the disanalogies. What I take from the disanalogies that I have identified is that the climate change case is much more difficult than the one that Austen described; and since even a straightforward obligation like the one John is under can be rationalized away, we should be very pessimistic indeed that people will come to see themselves as

having duties not to contribute to climate change and then effectively act on them.

### III

#### **Conclusion: Steve and Dale**

In this paper I have accentuated the differences between my views and Gardiner's. I have especially emphasized my view that we do not see many of the actions that contribute to climate change as morally valanced, in contrast with Gardiner's view that in many cases we fail to do what is right even by our own lights. Probably neither of us believes that the points that we have emphasized are the whole story. I want to close by bringing out a deep point of agreement. Our failure to act efficaciously in response to climate change indicates a crisis of agency, both in ourselves and in our institutions. Perhaps the greatest challenge of this century is to reconstruct and instantiate forms of individual and collective agency that will enable us to manage the problems that we face to live meaningful lives in a rapidly changing world.

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