

The Climate Issue: Widespread agreement and the choice of a moral policy.

The issue of global warming (or climate change or weather disruption or whatever the current label is) is often put forward as a moral issue, but this does not change the need to pay attention to the science. Indeed, the latter is a crucial prelude to the former. The situation here may not be as complex as is sometimes suggested. Frequently the questions posed in public discussions are so reductionist as to be silly. Is it warming or not? Is CO₂ increasing. Is climate changing? Is summer sea ice decreasing? Such questions actually disguise what are the real policy-relevant questions. These are inevitably quantitative rather than yes-no in character.

Though it would be difficult to speak of universal agreement over any aspect of the issue, it is nonetheless the case that there are many areas of agreement among most of the scientists on both sides of this issue. Such agreement hardly insures that these views are correct, but, for the moment, they are a reasonable starting point.

There is general agreement that there has been a relatively small and irregular increase in global mean temperature anomaly over the past couple of hundred years; by 'relatively small' I mean relative to the actual variability of this quantity at any given location or even region. There is also agreement that this quantity has not risen for the past 17 years or so. Over the past two centuries the warming has been less than 1C.

There is general agreement that climate is always changing. To be sure, climate is more than simply the global mean temperature anomaly.

There is agreement that there is a greenhouse effect, and that doubling CO₂, in the absence of any feedbacks, will lead to warming on the order of 1C; this is generally felt to be unalarming and perhaps even beneficial. The issue of feedbacks is crucial. Alarm requires, at the least, that these feedbacks actually greatly amplify the impact of man's contribution to greenhouse gases.

There is agreement that CO₂ in the atmosphere is increasing, and that current levels are about 35% greater than pre-industrial levels; there is agreement that much of this increase is likely due to industrial emissions.

There is agreement that when combined with other increasing greenhouse gases (like methane, nitrous oxide, etc.), the total greenhouse forcing is about 80% of what one expects from a doubling of CO₂. That is to say, we are effectively pretty close to a doubling of CO₂ in terms of greenhouse impact.

While there is significant disagreement as to whether feedbacks will diminish or amplify the effect of CO₂, there is virtually no disagreement that the impact of each added amount of CO₂ diminishes relative to earlier amounts. This is referred to as the logarithmic regime.

There are two more points which I find substantial agreement over within the climate research community, but which might be contested by environmental activists:

Namely, that increases in CO₂ will not jeopardize the planet, itself, and that any relation of increases in global mean temperature anomaly to such more relevant issues such as regional climate, storminess, extreme weather, etc. are not evident in the data nor are they robust features of models.

It is worth noting that none of the above point to alarm. Nevertheless, there has been a huge effort to implement mitigation policies. The presumed basis is essentially the precautionary principle. Despite the fact that there is no evidence for alarm, neither can it be rigorously rejected. The arguments for alarm are, moreover, frequently based on the misuse of scientific statements. For example, the IPCC iconic statement that there is 90% certainty that most of the warming of the past 50 years is due to man's emissions. While one may legitimately question the subjective assignment of a probability to such a statement, the statement, itself, is again completely consistent with there being no problem. To say that most of a small change is due to man is hardly an argument for the likelihood of large changes.

Such misuse of language and logic bring to mind Orwell's comment on the political implications of language: "It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." As to political language, itself, Orwell notes that it "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

Turning to policy, there is widespread agreement that mitigation measures, such as the Kyoto Protocol, will have no discernible impact on climate regardless of one's position on feedbacks.

Much more extreme measures will have no discernible impact on climate unless the most pessimistic and least supportable estimates of climate amplification are correct, and the proposed measures are universally adopted. All such measures, moreover, will have negative impacts on income, development, the environment, and food availability and cost – especially for the poor. We know these impacts are real because we are already seeing them and have been doing so for some time. That these measures are endorsed by the environmental movement is hardly reassuring. The movement has racked up an impressive record of endorsing measures that have led to the death and debilitation of millions of the world's most vulnerable. The complete banning of DDT and its impact on malaria is a notable but not unique example.

Under the circumstances, it would appear that the reasonable and moral policy would be to foster economic growth and well being in order that societies be better able to deal with climate change regardless of its origin. Mitigation policies appear to have the opposite effect without significantly reducing the hypothetical risk of any changes in climate. While reducing vulnerability to climate change is a worthy goal, blind support for mitigation measures – regardless of the invalidity of the claims – constitutes what might be called bankrupt morality. It is worse than bankruptcy when the proposed measures are counterproductive. It is not sufficient for actions to artificially fulfill people's need for transcendent aspirations in order for the actions to be considered moral.

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