

THE WORLD ACADEMY OF ART AND SCIENCE: GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2008

Panel on Ethics and Policies for Sustainable Futures
(Aalankrita Hotel, Hyderabad; 18-19 October 2008)

Responding to a Perfect Moral Storm? What Kind of Ethics will it Require in an Era of Human Induced Global Warming and Climate Change?

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Abstract

In this paper I will discuss the characteristics of the moral challenge posed to us by human induced global warming and climate change, how these characteristics undermine the very ability of humankind to respond to moral problems, and what, if anything, can be done about this in theory as well as in practical policy recommendations. With reference to global climate change, Stephen M. Gardiner has identified the characteristics of a perfect moral storm as “dispersion of causes and effects”, “fragmentation of agency”, and “institutional inadequacy”, arguing that they combine to create a context for moral corruption in the sense of “self-deceptive behaviour” and “selective attention strategies” that can serve as a cover for the current generation to continue with its exploitation of resources at the expense of future generations, without admitting this selfish behaviour even to itself. I will start my contribution with a discussion of Gardiner's thesis, and will then continue to explore possibilities to overcome the moral corruption that he refers to. My argument will be that if we are serious to respond to the moral challenges of human-made global warming, we will have to rethink our conventional notions of moral behaviour, and develop an ethics of complexity in which individual and collective action acquire new forms and new meanings.