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# 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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## UNESCO's COMEST

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- The World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology
- For further information, go to:
  - [www.unesco.org/ethics](http://www.unesco.org/ethics)
  - [geo@unesco.org](mailto:geo@unesco.org)
- Have put together a group of its members to work on Ethical Issues Related to Climate Change
- Aim of this presentation:
  - To enter in a dialogue with WAAS on issues related to the Ethics of Climate Change
  - Sharing insights from this working group
  - Learning from members of WAAS on this topic
- Proviso: What I share with you today is not an official UNESCO point of view, nor an official COMEST view. I rather speak as a member of the working group freely exploring ideas on the ethics of climate change, engaging with you as an academic.



## Activities in UNESCO on climate change

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- Intersectoral Platform for Action to Address Climate Change
- Is formulating a UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change
- Aim: helping Member States to
  - build and maintain the requisite knowledge base
  - adopt measures for adapting to the impacts of climate change,
  - contribute to the mitigation of its causes,
  - enhance sustainable development
- The Strategy seeks to ensure that UNESCO's actions are coherent with and supportive of the emerging United Nations system-wide approach to climate change and the Bali Road Map launched at the UNFCCC COP-13 in Bali in December 2007.



## Activities in UNESCO on climate change

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- It consists of an integrated multidisciplinary programme offering Member States capacity-building and technical advice
- It builds on two pillars:
  - sound and unbiased generation and use of data, information and research concerning climate change (the knowledge base); and
  - the application of educational tools, specific sectoral measures, public awareness activities and the development of national policy frameworks on climate change adaptation.
- For further information, go to:  
[www.unesco.org/en/climate-change](http://www.unesco.org/en/climate-change)  
<http://www.un.org/climatechange/>



## Why focus on the theme of the Ethics of Climate Change?

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- Debates around climate change ... usually focus on factual and technical issues
  - Does climate change indeed exist?
  - Is human behaviour really the cause?
  - Can we do something about it?
    - Adaptation
    - Mitigation
- Ethical issues around climate change are seldom articulated or addressed
- The ethical issues around efforts to mitigate or adapt to climate are embedded in documents like
  - The Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) of the IPCC
  - The Bali Road Map launched at the UNFCCC COP-13 in Bali in December 2007... But not explicitly discussed as ethical challenges that should be taken into account in policy formulation in response to climate change
- What is often mentioned in passing are justice issues, but the cluster of ethical issues around climate change goes much further than justice issues



## Work already done in this area

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- Buenos Aires Draft Declaration on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change (2004)
- White Paper on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change (Rock Ethics Institute, Pennsylvania State University)
- Stephen M. Gardiner, Ethics and Global Climate Change, *Ethics* 114, (April 2004): 555-600
- Stephen M. Gardiner, A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Corruption (unpublished paper)



## Gardiner's thesis

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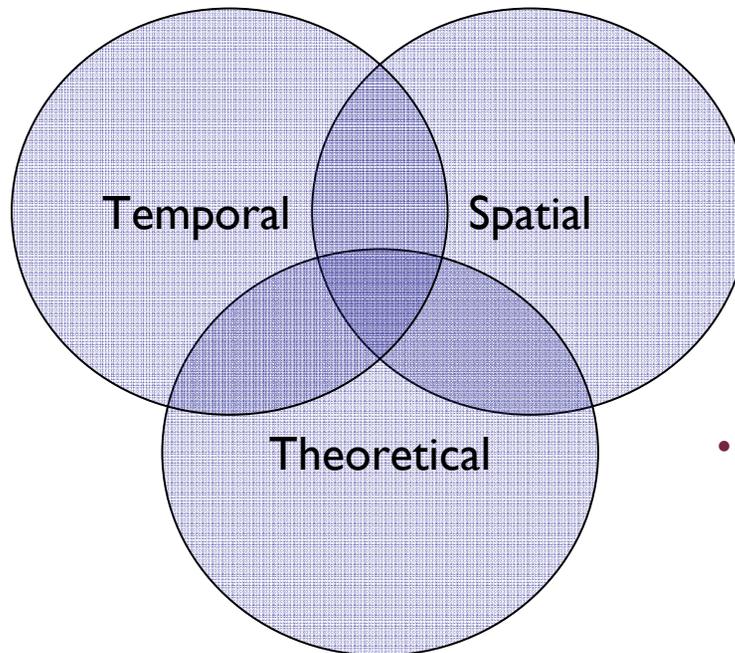
- The characteristics of global climate change confronts us with a perfect moral storm
- That conveniently creates an opportunity for this generation to continue with exploitative behaviour that will harm future generations, without having to acknowledge that this is what we are doing
- We avoid overly selfish behaviour, while taking advantage of our present position, without the unpleasantness of acknowledging it to ourselves
- Gardiner characterizes this as moral corruption
- The features of climate change poses obstacles to our ability to make the hard choices necessary to address it:
  - We shy away from difficult ethical questions
  - We shy away from taking effective action
- So what are these characteristics and how do they challenge us?



## Characteristics of climate change



- Dispersion of causes and effects
- Fragmentation of agency
- Institutional inadequacy



- Global storm
  - Intergenerational storm
  - Storm of incomprehension
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- Super-storm: of moral corruption



## Dispersion of causes and effects

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- Under a spatial perspective
  - Emissions of greenhouse gas are geographically located
  - Impacts are realized the world over
- Under a temporal perspective
  - Effects of climate change are time lagged
  - Climate change is a resilient problem
  - Climate change impacts are seriously backloaded
  - Climate change is a seriously deferred problem



## Fragmentation of agency

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- Under a spatial perspective
  - Climate change is caused by a vast number of individuals and institutions
  - Not unified by a comprehensive structure of agency
- Under a temporal perspective
  - Temporally fragmented agents cannot actually become unified
  - Present generations typically act in self-interest, leaving future generations worse off (Perfect Intergenerational Problem) 
- Factors exacerbating the Perfect Intergenerational Problem
  - A multiplier effect
  - Insufficient action may cause some generations to suffer unnecessarily
  - Inaction may create situations in which tragic choices must be made



## Institutional inadequacy

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- Effective response to climate change would require
  - Global regulation of greenhouse gas emissions
  - A reliable enforcement mechanism
- Current international system makes this difficult, if not impossible
- Makes an effective system of global governance essential
- [International agencies are fragmented and ineffective]
- [National agencies are equally fragmented and ineffective]



## Further complicating factors

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- Scientific uncertainty
- Causes of climate change are deeply embedded in the infrastructure of current human civilizations (burning of fossil fuels drives existing economies)
- Skewed vulnerabilities



## Theoretical inadequacy

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- We assume that the state is the agent that can respond adequately to the challenges of climate change
- We assume that states can be persuaded to act rationally in the interests of the common good
- We assume that states are still the most effective institutions to represent the interests of citizens
- We assume that rational analysis can help us to comprehend the challenges of climate change and get us out of our quandaries
  - We are faced with a prisoner's dilemma
  - We are face with a Perfect Intergenerational Problem



## So, where does the 'perfect moral storm' leave us?

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- It enhances our insight into the challenges of climate change and  
It problematizes action and justifies inaction
- It portrays nation-states as the relevant moral agent to respond to climate change while  
Obscuring what it takes to make efficient climate change policy
- It opens our eyes to the complexity of the challenge of climate change only to  
Give us a cover under which it can seem that we take the problem seriously
- In short, it leaves us in a position of perfect moral corruption: distraction, complacency, unreasonable doubt, selective attention, delusion, pandering, false witness, hypocrisy



## What kind of an ethics do we need to respond to this?

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- The principles of conventional ethics seems to be inadequate:
  - Respect for life
  - Respect for the dignity of persons
  - Do no harm
  - Do good
  - Justice
  - Truth
- All of them seem to fall by the way-side in the face of climate change
- There does not seem to be an obvious way to again appeal to them, to restore them, because they seem to be applicable to
  - Simple cause-effect relationships (low-population and low-technology societies)
  - Individual agency (harms and their causes are individual, readily identified, located in time and space)
  - Institutional adequacy



## So, how should we proceed?

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- We need a radical rethink of our basic moral practices and principles
  - Move away from instrumental calculative rationality
  - Move towards a value rationality, informed by 21<sup>st</sup> century virtues, such as humility, courage, moderation
- We should fall back on traditional moral notions:
  - The no harm principle
  - The right to physical security
- In the face of scientific uncertainty, we should fall back on the Precautionary Principle
  - When an activity raises threats of harm to human health of the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. (Wingspread Statement, 1998)
- Which precautionary measures should be taken?
  - Start immediately with changes in present energy consumption that has short-term as well as long-term economic benefits
  - Act on low-cost emissions-saving measures as soon as possible
  - What next? – not clear [An area for further work]



## Ask those serious questions that no one ventures to ask

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- And clarify the principles on the basis of which we answer them
- Who should take what action?
  - Industrial countries should clean up the mess because of past emissions?
  - Industrial countries (ICs) should pay compensation for damages to lesser developed countries because ICs have overused a common resource, thus denying other countries the opportunity to use their “shares”
- How should we allocate the costs and benefits of greenhouse gas emissions and abatement?
- Can industrial countries be excused from responsibility because they were ignorant of the impacts at the time when they started emitting GHGs?
- Is there an obligation on rich nations to assist poorer nations to mitigate and adapt to climate change – because of their previous causal role?
- Should we not forget about past emissions and only focus on future emissions?



## How should future emissions be allocated?

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- Should we opt for equal per capita entitlements? (Setting a ceiling?)
- Should we go for a right to subsistence emissions? (A guaranteed minimum?)
- Give priority to the least well-off?
- Equalize marginal costs?



## Other serious questions

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- Can we continue to use scientific uncertainty as an excuse not to take action?
- Can we continue to use cost to national economies as an excuse not to take action?
- Can we continue to use lack of new generation technologies as an excuse not to take action?
- Do nation states have an independent responsibility to act?
- Which principles of procedural justice should be followed to assure fair representation in climate change decision- and policy-making? [Procedural fairness]



## In conclusion

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- Is it then fair to say that climate change is fundamentally a value issue?
- All of the questions listed above boils down to the fundamental question of:

How should we live?

What kinds of societies ought we to have?

- We are back at the four famous questions of Kant:

What can we know?

What can we hope for?

What ought we to do?

Who are we?

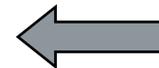


## Perfect intergenerational problem (PIP)

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- PIP 1. It is *collectively rational* for most generations to cooperate: (almost) every generation prefers the outcome produced by everyone restricting pollution over the outcome produced by everyone overpopulating.
- PIP 2. It is *individually rational* for all generations not to cooperate: when each generation has the power to decide whether or not it will overpollute, each generation (rationally) prefers to overpollute, whatever the others do.
  - Gardiner 2004: 8
- In PIP 1 the current generation is not included; and this is iterated over time
- In its pure form, generations do not overlap, so: next generation cannot influence present generation (PIP 2) – the reciprocity problem







## So where else should we look for help?

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- A sophisticated ethics of complexity, discourse analysis and ideology critique
- An ethics of complexity requires
- An ethics informed by discourse analysis focus on
  - Institutionalized speech, and What what we say says
- An ethics of ideology critique draws our attention to
  - The mechanisms through which meaning is used in the service of asymmetric power relations, characterized by domination and exploitation
- Gardiner, in a sense, do all of the above