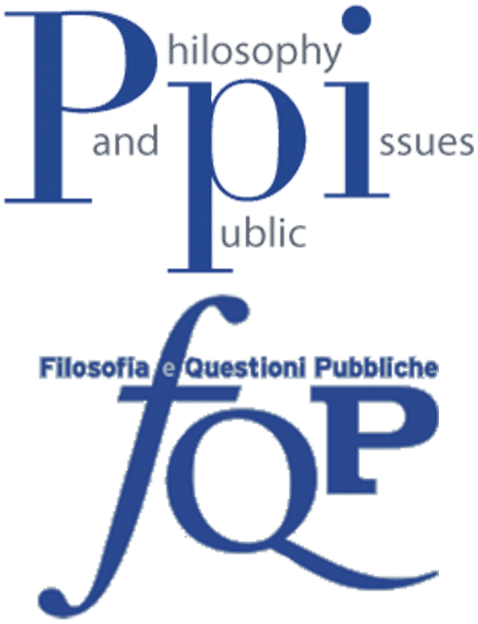
SYMPOSIUM

A CHANGING MORAL CLIMATE



CLIMATE CHANGE AND MORAL CORRUPTION

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Climate Change and Moral Corruption

Marcello Di Paola

Stephen Gardiner's *A Perfect Moral Storm* is a thorough and penetrating diagnosis of the challenges that global climate change poses to our political, economical, social, scientific, and moral systems. It is also an illuminating elucidation of some important reasons for our failure to address the problem.

> My thesis is this. The peculiar features of the climate change problem pose substantial obstacles to our ability to make the hard choices necessary to address it. Climate change is a perfect moral storm. One consequence of this is that, even if difficult ethical questions could be answered, we might still find it difficult to act. For the storm makes us extremely vulnerable to moral corruption (22).[1]

In this piece, I comment on the notion of moral corruption. In particular, I discuss the issues of who is susceptible to it (§ 1), and of what sort of problem moral corruption is (§ 2).

[1] Stephen Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm. The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012). Unless otherwise specified, parenthetical references refer to this text.

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I

Patterns of Agency

Not only in the quote above, but throughout the book, Gardiner makes a somewhat casual use of the terms "we," "us," "our," etc. Depending on context, "we" comes to mean individuals (58); present generations or "current populations" (38); the affluent of present generations (6); "our (largely national) institutions," and more generally "the current global system" (29); humanity at large (3-4); but also all "morally serious people" (5); and all moral agents whatever (11).

There could be at least two reasons for such latitude. First, when it comes to climate change, agency is causally and spatiotemporally fragmented (24-28): all are implicated, and "We" is sure not to leave anyone out. Second, Gardiner is interested not in "the question of the relative contribution of different agents, or the causal influences operating between them," but rather in uncovering "underlying structural patterns of agency" (59, note 12). As it becomes clear (58-59), he refers to structural *motivational* patterns.

> In conclusion, my key motivational claim is that, other things being equal, the decisions that cause climate change are driven by concerns with very limited spatial and temporal horizon. Unfortunately, this assumption (applied to individuals, businesses, and governments) seems both perfectly realistic in the world in which we live, and more than sufficient to generate the perfect moral storm (60).

"We," then, comes to designate a form of agency that is causally and spatiotemporally fragmented, but whose underlying structural pattern, at least at the level of motivation, is basically one. Because this pattern no less than "generates" the perfect moral storm, on it "some kind of intervention (e.g. by governments, or individuals and firms themselves) is necessary to avoid a moral disaster" (63). Said intervention should "engage

motivations with a longer time-horizon and wider purview, including moral motivations such as those for intergenerational justice and respect for nature" (61).

Gardiner's basic motivational claim, though realistic indeed, obscures some morally relevant facts. Even granting that all agents share the same, spatiotemporally limited basic motivational pattern, and that such pattern generates the perfect moral storm, different agents may be more or less morally justified in relying and holding on to it. Specifically, while it is true that businesses and governments are moved by spatiotemporally limited motivations, there are substantial moral considerations justifying that. Businesses are obligated to their living shareholders, first and foremost; governments are obligated to their living citizens, first and foremost (and plausibly, but already less stringently, to the next couple of generations of their future citizens—that being still quite far from the sort of spatiotemporal expansion Gardiner is calling for). Of course, there are familiar arguments to the effect that both businesses and governments should adopt a (much) more expansive moral perspective—but these arguments are far from uncontroversial, infested by assurance problems, and often fragile when pushed into tight corners. Understandably, Gardiner does not undertake a thematic venture in their favor. Absent that, however, we have no conclusive grounds for declaring the limited motivational patterns of businesses and governments to be morally unjustified: and that weakens the request that they be expanded.

The situation may be different with individuals. Their spatiotemporally limited motivational patterns, though perfectly understandable psychologically—after all, our motivational apparatus has evolved in response to problems mostly unfolding in the "here and now"—are much harder to justify morally, as individual morality is widely held to be an impartial exercise, and

that means also spatiotemporally impartial. The claim that agents should embrace spatiotemporally expansive moral motivations may thus have a chance at being immediately authoritative if these agents are understood to be *individuals*. The question would then follow, as to where these motivations should come from. The most obvious source would be moral obligations. However, it remains unclear whether individuals have moral obligations against climate change.[2] It is also unclear who, or what, should be

[2] On this topic see, among many others, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "It's Not *My* Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations" in *Perspectives on Climate Change,* edited by W. Sinnott-Armstrong and R. Howarth (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005), 221–253. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that no individual has a moral obligation to take unilateral, self-starting action against climate change, because no individual is personally responsible for climate change (and the harms it will bring), and that in turn because no isolated individual has made or can make any significant causal difference to it (negative or positive). The conclusion is that individuals must delegate the matter to governments—as governmental action has made and can make a difference—and do so *effectively*: they must make sure that governmental action makes a *positive* difference, by voting appropriately, protesting, monitoring, lobbying, and the like. Sinnott-Armstrong thinks of such forms of political engagement as *moral* obligations because, as a consequentialist, he thinks of them as specific verdicts of the general consequentialist obligation every individual always has—that of making things best overall. Gardiner's own view on this topic picks up on Sinnott-Armstrong's gesture at political engagement, but loses the consequentialist rationale for it. His proposal is that anti-climate change individual obligations can be salvaged by focusing directly on political rather than moral responsibility. The reasoning goes like this: individuals delegate to governments in many cases—particularly in those cases that either cannot be addressed or would only be poorly handled at the individual level (complex collective action problems such as security provision, for instance). But sometimes governments fail to do their job, and that is to say that the delegation itself has failed. In such cases, says Gardiner, "the responsibility falls back on the citizens, to either solve the problems themselves or, if this is not possible, to create new institutions to do the job. If they fail to do so, then they are subject to moral criticism for having failed to discharge their original responsibilities" (p. 403). But what are these "original responsibilities" that

the addressees of such obligations.[3] Gardiner says our theories on these matters are "underdeveloped" (7), implying that work can be done to better align their verdicts to the hitching moral inkling

"fall back" on the citizens, and where are they coming from? In other words, what can so authoritatively stop individuals, once anti-climate change delegation has failed, from just letting the whole thing go? Is it the mere fact that some *other* delegation was at some point made? This seems rather peculiar. There must be independent reasons why delegating, and ensuring the effectiveness of the delegation, is (and was) important in its own right: and one suspects these must be *moral* reasons (not a particularly imaginative suspicion, since Gardiner himself says that the sort of criticism citizens will be subject to if they fail is specifically moral). From Gardiner's argumentation, it transpires less clearly than it does from Sinnott-Armstrong's whether these reasons descend from a general consequentialist obligation to make things best overall. I doubt that this is Gardiner's position. So the "original responsibilities" he refers to must come from elsewhere. One possibility is that there is a non-consequentialist moral obligation to delegate effectively, which is as general and as powerful as its consequentialist counterpart. This may be Gardiner's view, but it is not explicitly laid out in the book. Another possibility, coming back full circle, is that the "original responsibilities" in question stem from individuals being indeed responsible for climate change in the sense that *it* (not just their failed delegation against it) is their "fault," in Sinnott-Armstrong's meaning of the word. But this would of course resurrect the problem of how one can be morally responsible for some outcome, if one has made and can make no difference to it. On this point, see Marcello Di Paola, "Who Does What, Why, and How," in *Canned Heat: the Ethics and Politics of Global Climate Change*, edited by Marcello Di Paola and Gianfranco Pellegrino (Delhi: Routledge Publishing, 2014), 144-159.

[3] Parfit's non-identity problem undermines the very idea that we can do wrong to future generations—see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1984), chapter 16. As for our obligations to nature, or elements thereof (e.g. plants, species, landscapes, ecosystems), the many attempts at establishing their moral considerability have, for different reasons, been largely unsuccessful (one notable exception being the case of animals). If such elements have no moral standing, then they cannot even count as legitimate addressees of any moral obligations at all. These are open issues—for a review of relevant arguments see Dale Jamieson, *Ethics and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chapters 3, 5, 6.

that we (individuals) *must* have *some* obligations towards those (human and non-human) we can so deeply harm through climate change. No doubt our theories are underdeveloped: however, it cannot be assumed that developing them will give us the answers we want. For all we know, it might just confirm that our itching moral inkling is simply misguided.

That does not have to be the end of the story, however. If morality fails, maybe ethics can do the trick.[4] Perhaps, the motivations that we need will come from a self-starting individual *resolve* to contrast climate change, *irrespective* of whether one has a moral obligation to do so. Resolves are freely adopted intentions, which regiment one's behavior to a freely adopted course of action. One may make all sorts of resolves for all sorts of reasons: I might resolve against climate change out of perfectionist or aesthetic reasons, for instance, or even out of spite, caprice, or a cheerful sense of revolt.[5] What is distinctive of resolves is not the sorts of reasons grounding their adoption, but the fact that their adoption entrenches such reasons, whatever they may be. Resolves are intentions especially designed to stand firm in the face of contrary inclinations and/or dissonant information; and their pursuit is non-contingent on the behavior of others. In

[4] Gardiner often uses "moral" and "ethical" interchangeably, too. I think it better to distinguish clearly, if only roughly. Morality concerns our treatment of others, and speaks the language of obligation. Ethics, on the other hand, has to do with our own character, with the way we look at the world as well as ourselves and our place in it, with how we choose to live our lives and what is important to us—with "who we are." Ethics speaks the language of virtue.

[5] See Marcello Di Paola, "Virtues for the Anthropocene," *Environmental Values*, forthcoming.
http://whpress.co.uk/EV/papers/Di%20Paola.pdf.

model cases, having resolved in favor of a certain course of action, I simply avoid reconsidering my stance.[6]

The pursuit of resolves is always a matter of character and strength of will, not duty. That gets us closer to the domain of virtue theory.[7] That virtues rather than obligations are in the background of Gardiner's thought is revealed by Gardiner himself in the following passage:

> […] what might broadly be called virtue theory […] seeks to identify the characteristic "temptations" present in certain situations, positions, or ways of life, where these are understood as vulnerabilities to behaving badly to which many are likely to be susceptible. Such work is helpful not only for thinking about how to resist acting badly, but also in coming to understand ourselves as moral agents. "Who we are," morally speaking, is a significant ethical issue, and one which […] has considerable bearing on the global environmental tragedy (4).

Gardiner connects virtue with the capacity to resist temptations. He also tells us that analyzing the sort of temptations to which we are susceptible helps us understand ourselves as moral agents. Such talk of temptations, resistance, and self-understanding again seems to indicate that, with the terms "we," "us," "our," etc., reference is being made not to all agents but to individuals specifically (in particular to presently living, affluent, "morally serious" individuals). It is individuals that must engage different motivations; and it is individuals who are susceptible to moral corruption.

[6] See Richard Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), for an extended discussion.

[7] Though, of course, the connection between resolves and virtue development and exercise needs much more detailed unpacking, which I cannot provide here.

II

Moral Corruption

In an important passage, Gardiner writes:

> If we are tempted by buck-passing, but reluctant to face up to moral criticism for succumbing to it (our own, or that of others), we are likely to be attracted to weak or deceptive arguments that appear on the surface to license such behavior, and so to give such arguments less scrutiny than we ought. A particularly deep way of doing this is through the corruption of the very terms of the debate […] Given this, it becomes even more necessary than usual to be vigilant about our own reasoning. Unfortunately, addressing corruption of the understanding is not easy (302).

Moral corruption is corruption *of the understanding*, of the way we think and talk of climate change (we must "be vigilant about our own reasoning").[8] Gardiner develops and illustrates this idea by discussing the case of John Dashwood, a character in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Having promised his dying father that he shall use part of the inheritance to take care of the economic wellbeing of the women in the family, John quickly loses his resolve under the influence of his wife Fanny's morally twisted arguments.

In my opinion, Gardiner's characterization of moral corruption risks obscuring an important part, if not the actual

[8] Though Gardiner provides a number of characterizations of moral corruption at the beginning of chapter 9 (pp. 303-307), some of which are not reducible to "corruption of the understanding," he effectively restricts his focus on the latter throughout the rest of his exposé. He also takes a revealing Kantian angle when actually defining moral corruption (p. 307): "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."

nature, of the ethical enterprise individuals must confront when acting against climate change. There are numerous ways in which the analogy drawn between the case of John Dashwood and "ours" is imperfect, as Gardiner himself admits. But one is particularly relevant for my purposes—and, peculiarly, it is one that Gardiner explicitly excuses, even denies. While Dashwood has promised his father to take care of the women in the family, *thus* contracting an obligation, there obviously exists no promise that "we," as individuals, have made to the effect that we shall take care of the spatiotemporally distant or the rest of nature. And here Gardiner makes a peculiar move, which suddenly factors out the theoretical storm he has himself so clearly denounced. He says: "The normative authority of this promise plays a role similar to that of norms of global and intergenerational ethics in the perfect moral storm" (312). He does recognize that "John makes an explicit commitment to aid that is conspicuously lacking in the global and intergenerational case," but comments that "this disanalogy is not too important, since I doubt that duties of global and intergenerational justice require this kind of consent" (312).[9]

We are thus suddenly rescued from the theoretical storm and transposed onto a placid moral shore, where duties of global and intergenerational justice not only exist, but hang over our heads

[9] Gardiner adds: "Moreover, it seems likely that John makes the promise in large part because of his own understanding of his intergenerational responsibilities to his father and relatives as the new head of the family." This seems conjectural. What we know is that John's father has made him promise, and the promise would obligate John whether or not he had an understanding of his intergenerational responsibilities. Moreover, even if he did, inter- and intra-generational duties to close members of one's own family are quite different from "duties of global and intergenerational justice," customarily understood to extend to humanity at large and into the further future.

with more moral weight than promises themselves. This has implications for Gardiner's characterization of moral corruption:

> In a situation where the moral requirements are otherwise clear, the discerning will be reluctant to go against them without some (at least vaguely) plausible rationale for doing so. Here rival (but specious) moral claims can be very attractive. They allow one to neglect unpleasant moral demands while still apparently seizing the moral high ground; indeed, they may even license the denouncing of the correct demands as actually immoral (308).

If one assumes that "moral requirements are otherwise clear," those going against them will be acting akratically—against better judgment (i.e. judgment of what is best). Moral corruption will then be similar to what "opinion" was for Aristotle: "specious moral claims," or opinion as opposed to true reason, will cloud our understanding, our ways of thinking and talking about climate change, the "discourse," the "debate"—causing *judgment shifts* (we may end up denouncing "correct demands as actually immoral").[10] If, on the other hand, one does not assume the clarity of moral requirements, then there is no better judgment to appeal to, and moral corruption is changed into a corruption not of the understanding but of character—something like weakness of will.[11]

[10] Gardiner's Kant sees moral corruption much in this Aristotelian way, too—with the further, typically Kantian specification that the workings of "opinion" are all propelled by, and geared towards better suiting, "our wishes and inclinations."

[11] Like any taxonomical schematization, the distinction between akrasia and weakness of will can be contested. Indeed, many writers do not draw it at all. However, the coincidence of these two phenomena is neither logically nor practically necessary (see Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 83-96). For example, I might *judge* that, given climate change, having children is not the best individual course of action to take; and yet *intend* not only to have children but also to make their lives as comfortable as possible, ensuring their

This takes us back to where we started. For as important as thinking and talking correctly about climate change can be, the main point is not to preserve the debate, but to intervene on and upgrade the motivational patterns that—as Gardiner told us—*generate* the problem. So why focus primarily on an analysis of the former task, and not the latter? And what are the promises of doing so? If the moral requirements are *not* "otherwise clear," then there is no better judgment to appeal to when trying to clear up the terms of the debate. Of course, this does not mean that no clearing up is possible or useful, but it does mean that it will have to be done without reference to postulated moral requirements. If, on the other hand, there is a better judgment, then the mechanisms of moral corruption, as described by Gardiner, will work precisely by shifting it. And if moral corruption really entails Dashwood-style judgment shifts, then surely we should not expect the impetus to resist moral corruption to come from the judgment that resistance is best.

Gardiner himself says something similar:

> […] even if the best theories were to hand, it is not obvious that we could rely on ourselves simply to grasp and then correctly apply them. The apparent temptations not to do so and the subtle mechanisms of moral corruption are formidable obstacles. In ignoring them, the "invoke and apply" model fails to take seriously the problem at hand (309).

I think this is just right. But then, how are we to resist? Moral corruption is characterized *as if* the best theories were to hand, by assuming obligations we are not at all sure to have—unlike John Dashwood, who did contract an obligation by promising. These (assumed) obligations should arguably encapsulate some

enjoyment of high levels of consumption. In fulfilling that intention, I am acting akratically, and yet I do not seem to be displaying weakness of will: after all, that is the intention I have, and I am fulfilling it (perhaps with great effort, even, and perseverance, and self-sacrifice).

judgment as to what is morally best. We are then lead through a long (and brilliantly presented) journey into the meanders of our corrupted understanding of that judgment; but all the while we know—because Gardiner told us—that the real problem is motivational: and again, we have no reason to believe that the motivational problem will be solved through a better effort of the understanding.

In all this, an exhortation to virtue is buzzing in the background—though Gardiner confuses us with talks of duty. But we now wonder whether the virtue in question is really some kind of *epistemic* virtue—though one that is morally "powered," because structured in reference to some postulated judgment as to what is morally best. If Gardiner is right that the Perfect Moral Storm is generated by spatiotemporally limited motivational patterns, however, that is not the sort of virtue we need. To defuse the perfect moral storm, we need to engage motivations—not (just) ways of thinking—"with a longer time-horizon and wider purview." We thus need an account of what *practices*—what "forms of life"—would be most conducive to the development and exercise of relevant motivations (growing food locally through urban gardening, for instance, rather than shopping for imports at some mall). There is no apparent moral obligation to engage in such practices that our better judgment can reveal; but there is the *ethical possibility* of doing so, which a resolve can actualize. One's motivational set is obviously not an immutable deliverance of evolution: it also emerges—along with character more generally—from the totality of one's lived experience, and particularly from the behavioral regularities that are enabled and required by the practices one resolves to. Perhaps, then, individuals should just *choose* to develop and exercise "motivations with a longer time-horizon and wider purview," by resolving to certain practices and not others. Choice is the capacity to form intentions even in the absence of a firm judgment as to what is

best. Weakness of will is the failure to maintain one's intentions in the face of temptation, where the latter entails judgment shifts. Resolves are intentions specifically designed to stand firm in the face of judgment shifts. Strength of will is the capacity to follow through on one's resolves. To follow through on one's resolve to a practice (or set of practices) is to define one's life—to *live* (and not just *think*) one way and not another.

To defuse the perfect moral storm, individuals must then resolve in favor of anti-climate change practices, and hold strong.[12] This is the sort of virtue we need: *ethical* virtue. When the fundamental problem lies in our motivational shortcomings, avoiding rationalization and remaining clearheaded about "the terms of the debate" can only constitute a relatively modest accomplishment. Confronted with the Perfect Moral Storm, we may not be able to afford the modesty.

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[12] Again, individuals might make that resolve for whatever reasons, including prudential ones if the practice generates benefits and not just costs (as does food-producing urban gardening). It is a task for governments to tease and court such reasons. Note that a government that does that need not necessarily be giving up on its spatiotemporally limited (and yet morally legitimate) motivational pattern in favor of more expansive ones.

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