A Phenomenology of Global Climate Change

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Global Warming...Bad. Anthropogenic climate change...Bad. Reducing greenhouse gases...Good. Sound familiar? If it does, then you’ve probably thought the same way about the issue of global climate change that I have. In a world full of 10 second bites where the public has the attention span of a 5 year old and a maturity level to match, this kind of argument is easy to state, easy to understand, and easy to advocate. What’s more, this argument is easy to blindly to cling in a world where the complexities of life are increasing at an exponential rate. And why should anyone trade in this argument in favor of a more subtle and intricate one?

Surely there is something to be said for the beauty, efficiency, and possibly truth, in simplicity. After all, much scientific and technical reasoning operates on the law of parsimony, also known as Occam’s razor, which says that when faced with competing explanations for the same phenomenon, choose the simpler one. There are many examples where this kind of thinking has lead to powerful discoveries and insights, ranging from advances in theoretical physics to evolutionary biology. Yet, the realm of science is characterized by a method amenable to such thinking, where as the political realm is full of an uncertainty, unpredictability, and inherent complexity that can lead parsimonious thinking astray. After spending the last eight weeks studying global climate change, this has become abundantly clear. What were once an unquestioned assumption about the value of climate change and a somnolent conviction about how to prevent it have been brushed aside and replaced by a certainty in the uncertainty and complexity of the issue. It is no longer easy to even state my opinion of the subject, much less recommend a course of action. Every attempt to learn more about the subject introduces new complexity, not clarity, and I’ve begun to wonder whether my previous state of ignorance was actually
bliss. In trying to answer this question of whether my simplistic argument provided me with a more effective means of action than the subtle and sensitive analysis that I’ve come to embrace, I’ve realized that the question and answer are inextricably tied to a deeper problem about the meaning of life and how to live it. I’ve faced this problem head on in the past, and by relating my experience of it, I hope that an important insight about the human psyche will become evident. Applying this insight to global climate change might bring some clarity to a situation characterized at the present by paralysis and inaction.

Growing up, I always found myself fascinated by the fantastic and wondrous worlds of fantasy and science fiction writing. Reading stories by J.R.R. Tolkien and Arthur C. Clarke allowed my imagination to escape the finite and limited world of the present in favor of a universe dominated by the beautiful, the unknown, and the profound challenges that purify and crystallize life. Often, I would find myself secluded in a room for hours on end as I imagined facing insurmountable evil, unraveling intangible schemes, and exploring an uncertain and fantastic future that the authors I read were able to describe so elegantly. Frequently, I saw many of the alternate realities I explored as superior to the one in which I lived. These new worlds were not only full of adventure and excitement, but they were built with a certain telos, a predefined goal to strive towards; the key was finding the right path. Yet, the implications necessitated by the fact were left unexplored for some time as I sought additional sources of fantasy and imagination instead of relating my thoughts and feelings to my life and the world around me.

After exploring numerous novels and short stories, the realities of life as an emerging adult turned my attention away from those exotic and futuristic worlds towards more grounded objects, such as finishing high school and working relentlessly in college.
Soon, I was swamped in the engrossing and almost suffocating world of academia, which demanded a great deal of time and much of my spare intellectual energy. For a while, the fantastical worlds that lived in the realm of sci-fi and fantasy were absent from my mental palette as I contemplated chemistry, physics, history, politics, and other topics that my liberal arts education led me to study. In particular, I began the groundwork for my biology degree and began to study mathematics, which I now find one of my main interests. During a particularly stressful semester and through some processes I do not yet understand, the deluge of information, particularly in the natural sciences and biology, led me to a kind of religious and metaphysical crisis, a reevaluation of the spiritual beliefs I had held since my childhood. I began to question many of my simplifying assumptions about reality and to probe many of my absolute moral convictions. This questioning, driven by an almost exterior and indefatigable force, shattered whatever sense of cohesion that had existed in my mental world. Faced with a world full of new uncertainties and no clear idea where I needed to go to find a new grounding and direction, I felt that I was drowning in darkness and falling forever through a chasm, uncertain of whether I would hit rock bottom, and if I did, what kind of landing it would be.

Despite my best efforts, I was not able to pierce the darkness and restore order to the framework I used to understand the world. In time, I began to accept my position even though the philosophical and spiritual transience was profoundly confusing and often frustrating. At some point in my reflections on this confusion and my previous spiritual state, I realized what had been, and continues to be, so alluring about the make believe worlds in sci-fi and fantasy. In these self-contained realms, the pervading telos provides a philosophical, spiritual, and ethical grounding, a sense of direction independent of any
characteristics or idiosyncrasies I or anyone else might have. For example, the universe of Frank Herbert’s *Dune* is one in which there exists a clear distinction between the moral and the amoral and between the good life and an empty existence. One need not wallow in a quagmire of philosophical questions; while specifics might remain ambiguous, the broad outline of a framework for effective and moral action exists. The key lies in choosing a particular path, a difficult effort to be sure, but one not riddled with fundamental uncertainty about the nature of the goal and the value of achieving it. The simplicity of these worlds was most alluring in the face of real life complexities I could not fully tackle.

In essence, I discovered that my preferred model for how the world works is a simple one, easy to state, easy to understand, and easy to *use*. What I had instead was a complicated, bloated, context dependent and self-contradictory model that was impossible to state and of questionable efficacy. In spite of the fact that I did not choose (in so far as I did not make a conscious, willful choice) to adopt such a cumbersome and problematic model of reality, I embraced it, as nothing simpler seemed to adequately address the complexity in my everyday environment. Nonetheless on a most basic emotional level, I still yearn for a simpler view in the hope that decisions would be easier and that the answers to some of life’s questions might begin to be answered. While I don’t anticipate any future revelation will provide me with my parsimonious philosophical model, acknowledging that drive towards simplicity as a basic element of my psyche can help me better construct ways of thinking about the world that might provide me with more peace of mind and might facilitate positive action on important issues. My eight weeks of studying global climate change and my 21 years interacting with other elements of
humanity suggest that what is a basic element in my psyche might be important in the human experience at large.

It’s easy to find trivial instances where people tend to prefer simple messages or arguments as opposed to more complex ones. Advertising is a prime example; advertisers know that catchy, simple messages are received better and retained longer than complicated ones. If one looks deeper, it is possible to see how people tend to prefer simple arguments about more important matters, such as issues of public policy, ethics, and spiritual matters. Many people would rather have three important reasons why a particular congressional candidate should be elected instead of a laundry list of their personal accomplishments and voting record on particular issues. Moreover, I would argue that many find it preferable to consider torture wrong simply because its hurtful or that it violates a particular religious principle rather than some complicated argument about moral obligation or maximizing happiness. This preference might even go as far as making simple spiritual or religious views preferable to ones that are hard to understand and difficult to apply to real life situations.1 While this preference is not necessarily universal, I believe that it is prevalent enough to make useful statements about patterns in human behavior.

As applied to global climate change, a preference for simplicity means that people would rather hear that global warming is happening and all we have to do is reduce greenhouse gasses through the Kyoto Protocol instead of hearing about all the uncertainties in the computer models and the multiplicity of ways to mitigate and adapt. This is clearly evident in the fact that the global climate change discussion has been framed in-terms of is

1 By simple, I mean easy to state. This does not necessarily mean such views are inflexible, insensitive, or absurdly obtuse. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is an example of a simple, yet flexible religious principle.
global warming happening, yes or no; and now more recently, do we adapt the Kyoto Protocol, yes or no. As one moves up from specific issues to global problems and finally to principles that apply to many situations in life, simplicity becomes more important. While one may be more inclined to consider the details of an inconsequential or small scale issue, such details lose their significance when the issue is of paramount global or personal importance. For example, if people are told that the nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain has a small, but definite, chance of experiencing a volcanic eruption, the fact that the risk exists will be weighed more heavily than any details concerning the size or uncertainty of the risk.

Thus, I think it is defensible to say that when people are thinking about environmental issues, they are more satisfied and more apt to act on ethical views that are simpler and more consistent. It is easier consider all endangered species worth saving instead of determining which species should be saved based on some kind of ecological cost-benefit analysis. Moreover, because of the broad scope of environmental ethics, people are very likely to be receptive to straightforward arguments about the value of nature or why the world’s current ecology should be preserved. If a majority of people in the United States or the world held ethical beliefs that support the value of nature and of preserving ecosystems for future generations, then it would be much easier to achieve a variety of environmental goals from energy reform to conservation, not to mention reductions in emission of greenhouse gasses. A simple and pervasive environmental ethic would go a long way towards breaking down the political barriers that resist environmentally informed policy decisions. The question is; how would such an ethic be cultivated?
The process of building some semblance of consensus around any particular political or ethic issue is difficult, painstaking, and lengthy. Building consensus about the value of nature and preservation of ecosystems would be hard, but there are a few advantages that environmental ethics has in such a process. First, the fact that nature has intrinsic value can often be cultivated through experience. When one walks in the wilderness, it is hard to see the surrounding environment as ugly or beautiful simply for the sake of its economic potential. Second, most people agree that human life has intrinsic value and they would also agree that the lives of their pets or any nurtured living being might have intrinsic value. Thus, it is easily conceivable that this intrinsic value could be extended to ecosystems. Finally, an ethical view that accords intrinsic value to some elements of nature and not others is a more complex and possibly self-contradictory viewpoint. A simpler argument according all of nature intrinsic value might be preferable on the rationale described above. Thus, it is plausible that given the right kind of grassroots work, people could begin to adopt some kind of environmental ethic. The environmental community knows that grassroots efforts can work as evidenced by one environmentalist at a Conference of Parties meeting concerning the Kyoto Protocol who lamented that had the environmental community been doing grassroots work for the last 10 years in order to cultivate support for greenhouse gas reduction, the U.S. stance on the Kyoto Protocol might be radically different. The same is true of an environmental ethic that might help achieve some sort of solution to global climate change. If activists and concerned citizens work hard enough for long enough at the local level, the people as a whole will begin to change their views. But remember, in order for this to work, as activists, intellectuals and politicians, KEEP IT SIMPLE, STUPID.