

Getting right the science of global warming

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, Vol. 74, No.6 (the cover wrongly says Vol. 76, No. 4), 15 October 2008

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1) The Earth is warming significantly, mainly as a result of the vast quantity of fuel people have burnt since the industrial revolution. 2) The Earth is warming significantly, but little if any warming is anthropogenic. 3) The Earth is not warming, at least not significantly.

Which of these three claims is true?

Strong arguments can be had for and against each, arguments that proceed from premises justified by empirical tests and observations. Which claim a researcher favours can be a matter of how that researcher interprets observations recorded in the literature and a matter of the theories and principles to which she appeals in constructing her models. Controversy exists because different researchers trust different observations, appeal to different theories, and construct their models using different principles.

This does not mean that the matter is beyond resolution. Not only is one of the three claims true and the others false, researchers might well come eventually to know which one is true (maybe some already do); moreover, a reasoned consensus might well form around the true one (maybe one already has). The task for scientists is to do well what scientists do—generate hypotheses, test them, integrate the results of their testing into theories and models, use these theories and models to generate further hypotheses, test these hypotheses...—until a reasoned consensus emerges, and perhaps even beyond that.

But is getting the science right really all that important from a policy perspective? No it isn't, one might think. That the Earth is warming significantly due to human activity is quite plausible and could well be true. If it is true, then we had better be working hard right now to slow the warming down. For an Earth warming significantly means widespread ecological collapse, and that means suffering and death for millions and a nasty existence for anyone who is left. From a policy perspective, that's about all the science we need.

The thought here is that wisdom counsels taking whatever steps one can to avoid an horrific outcome, whether or not one is certain that one faces an horrific outcome.

If it is true that the Earth is warming significantly, though, our only hope is massive intervention by governments on a world-wide scale. Turning off lights, driving less often, and buying energy-efficient washing machines isn't going to make the least bit of difference. People will have to change their lives drastically, and force will be needed

to make them do so. We in the West, even those of us who are far from wealthy, will suffer a staggering decline in our standard of living. We will have to abandon democracy, freedom, and prosperity.

The solution to the problem of anthropogenic global warming is awful. It's awful, and it might not work, as it might already be too late. That is the argument for caring to get the science of global warming right. We don't want to exchange democracy for authoritarianism, we don't want to help brutal governments like the regime in Beijing repress their people further, we want to reclaim our own civil liberties and not surrender them further, and we want to eat well and to live pleasantly. We ought to be pretty sure that things will entirely fall apart should we continue to tolerate the inefficiencies of democracy and freedom and to enjoy the fruits of prosperity, before we mobilize against these things that we hold dear.

There's a further point worth making here. Habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, cruelty to animals in agriculture, the war in Afghanistan, soil depletion, HIV and AIDS and public health generally, metals and poisons in rivers and lakes, urban sprawl, bad air, corrupt, brutal, and incompetent policing, poverty, the widening income gap—as a society, we currently face many problems that are as serious as problems can be short of calamitous. Might attending to global warming have distracted us from them or drained our energy? (But is it true that we can think only about two or three things at a time? Are we so low on energy that we need to marshal it carefully?) Yet these serious problems are tractable without abandoning democracy or freedom, and dealing with them might be central to our remaining healthy and prosperous. Let's put our politicians' feet to these particular fires.

Now one might say that in working against the evil of, say, factory farming, we are helping the cause of slowing global warming, if only in a small way. There's no competition here, one might insist, so we don't have to choose. Fair enough—if, indeed, I'm wrong that if the Earth is warming significantly, small steps are no steps at all. Nonetheless, I want to say, that factory farming is evil ought to be motivation enough for us to act against it.