Comments on Stephen Gardiner's "We Never Had Paris: Was the Paris Climate Agreement Greenwashing on a Planetary Scale?

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The adoption of the Paris Agreement (PA) in December 2015 was widely celebrated as a milestone in international climate policy, affirming the longstanding goal of limiting climate warming to 2 degrees Celsius, and promising further efforts to keep warming below 1.5°C. Ten years hence, after the hottest decade on record (NASA n.d.) and a continued upward trend in CO_2 emissions, these goals seem increasingly difficult to reach. Stephen Gardiner argues that these challenges were predictable: the Paris Agreement – like the Kyoto Protocol before it – falls prey to a number of moral problems associated with the "perfect moral storm" of climate change. Successfully weathering the storm requires a major political shift and a new global commitment to future generations that can disrupt the cycle of intergenerational buck passing Gardiner so aptly describes. To achieve this shift, I argue, may require addressing the moral psychology of intergenerational buck passing and the moral ambivalence that may encumber even those deeply concerned about climate change.

In his moral storm analysis – the centerpiece of *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* – Gardiner (2011) highlights three "storms" that make climate change an especially difficult and fraught moral problem: the global storm, the intergenerational storm, and the theoretical storm. The global storm has three elements. It results from 1) the geographically dispersed nature of climate change's causes and effects,

which in turn generates 2) the "fragmentation of agency,"[1] especially in light of 3) the lack of institutions well positioned to coordinate effective climate action.

Gardiner (2011, pp. 32-38; Gardiner and Weisbach 2016, pp. 24-32) argues that these features of the global storm each have temporal parallels, which together comprise the intergenerational storm. First, there are temporal gaps between causes and effects. Many of the impacts of greenhouse gasses emitted today will not be realized immediately but in decades to come, and conversely, the benefits from emissions cuts take time to be fully realized. Second, agency is dispersed in time, with people and institutions across many generations contributing to climate change and each generation facing the temptation to prioritize its own interests at the expense of those that follow. Third, this temptation is reinforced by the fact that "contemporary institutions are structured so that generation-relative interests dominate concern for the future" (Gardiner and Weisbach 2016, p. 29). In short, current dominant political and economic institutions such as electoral systems and capitalist market economies are presentist: they favor the immediate and the short-term.

The final storm is theoretical and reflects the lack of adequate conceptual resources to address climate change, from global, intergenerational, and ecological points of view. For example, many dominant ethical theories ignore the long-term future and do little to incorporate ecological concerns.

In "We Never Had Paris," Gardiner (2026) argues that we can see key features of the global and intergenerational storms playing out in the Paris Agreement. These features include:

- *Tyranny of the contemporary* and intergenerational buck passing, where the challenge of climate change is simply handed down from one generation to the next;
- *Moral corruption* that obscures the tyranny of the contemporary, through use of mechanisms such as "distraction, complacency, selective attention…and hypocrisy" (p. 12);
- The embrace of *shadow solutions* touted as "great victories" (p. 13) even though they fail to address the fundamental problem; and

[1] Because climate change is caused by a widely distributed group of uncoordinated actors, it is difficult to attribute responsibility or organize a response.

- The *neglect of fairness*, with a particular emphasis on skewed vulnerabilities, background injustices, and unholy alliances between privileged and marginalized groups that compound injustices for others.

Drawing on these ideas, in conjunction with a set of criteria for assessing the adequacy of any defensible climate regime, Gardiner develops an ethical assessment of the Paris Agreement. Four criteria – ambition, universality, compliance, and fairness – organize the analysis, and after evaluating the Paris Agreement on these criteria, Gardiner concludes that "we never had Paris": we must acknowledge the failure of the Paris regime and develop better and fairer responses to climate change.

In developing his analysis, Gardiner argues that although an optimistic assessment of the Paris Agreement is possible (consistent with a surface level analysis and the optimistic proclamations of PA's proponents and framers), a pessimistic assessment is more apt. Ultimately, he concludes that key features of the moral storm continue to loom large under the Paris Agreement. In short, the agreement perpetuates *intra*generational unfairness by favoring the interests of the powerful and neglecting the vulnerable, and it perpetuates *inter*generational unfairness through limited ambition for rapid emissions cuts and postponement of actions that would enable the world to reach the agreement's stated targets, all while masquerading as a triumphant achievement that will help to avert dangerous anthropogenic climate change. The mechanisms of moral corruption, Gardiner argues, are fully operative here: the agreement is vague, has few teeth, and does nothing to ensure a match between the stated goal of keeping climate change under 2°C and national mitigation pledges, nor to promote fair burden sharing among nations. As Gardiner puts it, "There is a huge gap – a gaping chasm – between the way the deal is presented to the global public and how much it actually achieves" (2026, p. 47). The PA's proponents and enthusiasts suggest that ambition will gradually ratchet upward, but little in the structure of the agreement or in three decades of climate negotiations and (in)action suggest that this will be the case.

Despite this sobering and pessimistic analysis, Gardiner concludes that "while Paris' failures do not entail that the international process is necessarily doomed, they do imply that it desperately needs saving, and that most of the hard work still lies ahead" (2026, p. 5). Gardiner recommends a "massive mobilization of political support" (2026, p. 54) and argues that an adequate response to climate change must address the lack of institutional structures and political will to take seriously intergenerational concerns. Here

and elsewhere, Gardiner (2014, 2026) calls for a global constitutional convention focused on future generations as a remedy.

With that overview on the table, I turn to my comments.

A Double-Edged Diagnosis?

With respect to the Paris agreement, and climate change generally, Gardiner's analysis brings into focus key aspects of the problem. The spatial, temporal, institutional, and theoretical dimensions of climate change complicate action and create incentives for self-interested actors to postpone or slow walk climate mitigation. As Gardiner points out briefly here and in detail elsewhere (e.g., Gardiner 2011), climate change is no ordinary tragedy of the commons. In a tragedy of the commons, individual actors have an incentive to exploit more than their share of a common resource (a field where sheep graze, a marine fishery, etc.), but commitment to shared stewardship of the resource benefits the community as a whole in the relatively near-term. What's more, in well-demarcated, spatially-defined commons at local and regional scales, it may be relatively straightforward to identify and bring together the relevant actors to forge a common agreement and enforcement mechanisms. For climate change, these felicity conditions do not hold. The causes and effects of global climate change are diffuse, and agency is fragmented globally, with virtually every person, corporation, government, and institution on earth playing some role in the problem.

It's not just the spatial dispersion of causes and effects and the fragmentation of agency that are complicating, however. Various actors are not positioned symmetrically in relation to climate change: some contribute vastly more than others, and some have vastly more power in climate negotiations. More broadly, certain actors have significantly greater leverage in shaping policy, institutions, and paths forward or maintaining business as usual. The temporal aspects of climate change further exacerbate the challenge, since today's emissions will have their greatest effects years down the road, and the same is true for today's emissions cuts.

Climate mitigation is like a global marshmallow test[2] on steroids. Delayed gratification by a single actor is not enough; instead, *many* must act, and the later benefits are indirect. Even for individuals or nations concerned about future generations, it may seem muddy as to whether *their* children and grandchildren will benefit from serious emissions-cutting efforts on their part. And as Gardiner points out, most institutions – local, national, global – are not set up to deal with this kind of test.

Gardiner's analysis is thus important and apt. The Paris Agreement seems from one perspective merely to be the next chapter in a long history of climate negotiations littered with inadequate ambition, coupled with outsized celebration and self-congratulation. As Gardiner himself argues, it is critical to understand the obstacles to action in order to confront them directly. The moral storm analysis offers insight, clarity and understanding. One of my students described the moral storm analysis as "cathartic." The analysis helps to explain what can be an incredibly frustrating and difficult question: Why has international action on climate change continually fallen short?

With that said, I do have one concern about the diagnosis, and this is that the pessimistic analysis of Paris – and the moral storm analysis more generally – has the potential to act as a double-edged sword. As I will explain, however, the appropriate response to this concern is not to abandon the moral storm analysis, but to blunt its second edge.

So why might the moral storm analysis be a double-edged sword? In my view, this is because the moral storm has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Gardiner's analysis suggests that climate change is not a standard tragedy of the commons: it is *worse*. At every turn, he astutely (and painfully) points out exacerbating factors and reasons for pessimism. In analyzing the Paris Agreement, Gardiner argues that although one can offer an optimistic interpretation, such an interpretation is naïve. Think the Paris Agreement looks good in terms of ambition by setting a clear goal of avoiding warming beyond 2°C and an aspirational goal of 1.5°C? In actuality, the Nationally Defined Contributions come nowhere close to putting the world on a path to achieving that target.

[2] The "marshmallow test" is a test of the capacity to delay gratification used in experiments by psychologist Walter Mischel and colleagues. In the test, children are given a treat (such as a marshmallow) and offered the choice of eating that treat immediately or waiting to get an additional treat. Some studies suggested a link between performance on the marshmallow test and later life outcomes. For discussion, see Mischel (2014).

Think that "naming and shaming" through the Global Stocktake will create a virtuous ratchet effect, where countries are provoked and catalyzed to increase their ambition over time? The signs are not promising: the agreement has no teeth beyond a reporting requirement, and the criteria for assessing various national pledges are vague. Not only are there are no common standards; the stocktake process limits the development of and accountability to such standards (see Gardiner 2026, pp. 35-42). The Green Climate Fund – aimed to assist poorer nations with adaptation and low-carbon development – is underfunded with limited dispersals and looks like a shell game where wealthy nations redirect and relabel existing international aid as contributions to the fund (Gardiner 2026, p. 45). All of this is bad, and it's true. So, why worry about the moral storm analysis?

The danger, in my view, is that those who see Gardiner's pessimistic analysis as apt may be driven into the arms of "realists" like David Weisbach, who think that ethics really has no place in climate policy (Gardiner and Weisbach 2016). Given the ethical failures of the Paris Agreement (and its predecessors), perhaps the only way that climate action will be possible is on the basis of self-interest. And this, in turn, might require that poorer nations actually pay the richer nations to cut emissions, given that it is the poorer and more vulnerable nations that have the most at stake (see, e.g., Posner and Weisbach 2010, p. 86). This is not an entirely theoretical concern: I have seen this response to the moral storm analysis in my students, some of whom see Gardiner's moral storm analysis as an apt *diagnosis* and Weisbach's position as an apt *response*.

There is no easy needle to thread here. We *do* need to face the problem and cut through the self-congratulatory rhetoric, because viewing the Paris Agreement as the "solution" to climate change obscures all sorts of issues. As Gardiner rightly points out, some of the most salient of these are the lack of overall ambition, lack of fairness, and mechanisms of moral corruption (such as the enabling of intergenerational buck passing and the pursuit of "shadow solutions" like reliance on the promise of extraordinary levels of yet-untested carbon dioxide removal technologies to achieve carbon neutrality). However, even though Gardiner himself insists that we ought not take this route, one reading of his pessimistic analysis may lead to the Weisbachian conclusion.

Blunting the Dangerous Edge: Addressing Moral Ambivalence

So how might the dangerous edge of the perfect moral storm analysis be blunted? Although he doesn't speak directly to this worry, Gardiner offers some suggestions that address it, since his response to the moral storm, and to the pessimistic view of Paris, is not to accept the situation as fixed, but rather to intervene to create the conditions for the possibility of a moral response to climate change. This move is critical: the moral storm analysis can be constructive as a diagnosis, but only if viewed as a diagnosis of a condition that can be ameliorated. The storm should not be accepted, but treated. It demands a response.

Gardiner argues that *massive mobilization* and a *global constitutional convention* focused on future generations are key elements of this response, and more broadly, institutional reform is critical. I support these suggestions, but argue that an adequate response may require further attention to moral psychology, and specifically to the moral psychology of the moral storm of climate change and its intergenerational dimensions.

Gardiner's own analysis considers some of the moral psychological dimensions of climate change, for example by highlighting moral corruption, or the tendency toward "deep distortion of the ways in which we talk about climate policy that helps to disguise what is really going on, ethically-speaking" (Gardiner 2026, p. 28). Multiple factors may underlie moral corruption, and in some cases, moral corruption may reflect intentional efforts to obscure inaction, unfairness, and intergenerational buck-passing by those with little interest in an ethical climate response. But in other cases, moral corruption may reflect various forms of moral ambivalence, which can generate problematic patterns that reinforce intergenerational buck-passing and impede substantive climate action. Facing the storm requires confronting this moral ambivalence, in part because it may be a barrier to the kind of political mobilization and institutional change Gardiner recommends.

I take the term *moral ambivalence* from moral philosopher David B. Wong (2006) who develops the idea in his book, *Natural Moralities*. There, Wong highlights how it is not uncommon for us to recognize the multiple values at stake in many familiar yet complex moral situations. Additionally, he suggests, in cases of moral disagreement, it is often possible to understand disagreement as grounded in different ways of organizing or prioritizing fundamental values. Wong uses these insights to develop a metaethical view – a pluralistic moral relativism – but the central insight for our purposes is that in many

contexts (including climate change), there are multiple values at stake, and moral ambivalence arises when these values conflict and it is unclear how to prioritize them.

As I have argued elsewhere, moral ambivalence arises in relation to climate change because there are tensions between the values underlying many current institutions, economies, and ways of living and the values that support ambitious climate action (Hourdequin 2022). These tensions play out in individuals' everyday lives, as parents concerned about climate change consider the value of supporting their children's extracurricular interests through travel to far-flung sports competitions with the value of limiting unnecessary emissions, and they play out in institutions, as universities consider the possibility of fossil fuel divestment to align with sustainability goals, while weighing the potential political and financial implications of making such a move. The Paris Agreement, too, may reflect various forms of moral ambivalence associated with tensions between the comfort, stability, and benefits (for some) of the status quo alongside the recognition that climate change poses real threats to current and future people, and to many other forms of life.

Just as the phenomenon of moral corruption is manifest in various common mechanisms that Gardiner identifies, moral ambivalence about climate change is reflected in certain repeated patterns that perpetuate intergenerational buck-passing. Three of these patterns are particularly prominent among those who have both the capacity and desire to contribute to ambitious climate action and institutional reform (the "currently empowered"), but may feel ambivalent due to values associated with existing policies, institutions, and ways of life:

1. *The Handoff Approach*: This is a form of intergenerational buck-passing that involves disproportionate focus on *describing* the climate crisis with minimal attention to climate *responses*. One common manifestation is found in academic lectures directed at young people that describe the dire outlook on climate change, then conclude with the proclamation that "your generation can solve these problems" and the exhortation to "do better" than prior generations. Although often intended as inspiration, this can send the implicit message that those who are currently empowered cannot be relied upon to act: the solution is up to those who are not yet in comparable positions of power. The Handoff Approach is tempting for the morally ambivalent because it reflects serious concerns about the climate crisis, but avoids the challenges and disruption of working for immediate change.

2. *Actively Reproducing the Status Quo*: Even those who care deeply about climate change are implicated in its continuance, contributing not only to the economic and political systems that support intergenerational buck-passing, but also to the value systems, educational structures, and even hopes for the future that perpetuate it. This pattern involves training the next generation to endorse and fit into status quo institutions, values, and patterns of thought, and it is driven in part by values tied to current ways of life along with fear of significant change, which are sources of moral ambivalence about climate action. To disrupt this dynamic requires the development of conceptual frameworks, institutions, and ways of living that challenge short-term and narrowly self-interested thinking. And it requires asking fundamental questions: What kind of world do we want to help build? What kinds of relationships are important to develop and sustain? What kinds of people can help create a world where mutual flourishing is possible?
3. *"There is No Alternative" Thinking:* Moral ambivalence about climate action also plays out in "there is no alternative" (TINA) thinking, which excludes pathways that involve significant social or institutional transformation. More specifically, TINA thinking "rationalizes the mismatch between values (such as a commitment to the flourishing of future generations) and practices (such as continued investments in fossil fuels) by citing the difficulty or impossibility of change" (Hourdequin 2022, p. 80). We see this pattern when government officials insist that renewable energy can never be an adequate replacement for fossil fuels, or that people will never give up their cars. It's important to note that although TINA thinking can be employed disingenuously by those wanting to forestall climate action, it also emerges among the morally ambivalent because it helps to preserve status quo values while justifying certain forms of inaction by ruling them out as impossible or impracticable.[3]

All three of these patterns tend to resolve moral ambivalence in favor of the status quo, and they have implications for younger generations, because they may generate a moral psychology of intergenerational buck passing that includes not only ambivalence, but – among those who witness the ongoing failures of older generations to address the problem – anger, resentment, disillusionment, lack of solidarity, and hopelessness. To disrupt this cycle of buck-passing requires that those of us who are currently empowered and who care about climate change address our own moral ambivalence, developing institutions and strategies to address the problem rather than training next generation to contribute to it.

[3] These patterns and their relationship to moral ambivalence and intergenerational buck-passing are discussed in more detail in Hourdequin (2022).

Conclusion

Returning to Gardiner's analysis of the Paris Agreement, we might see the agreement itself as a manifestation not only of the power dynamics that characterize almost any international negotiation, but of a profound ambivalence about the kind of systemic transformation needed to address climate change with care for both intragenerational and intergenerational justice. Perhaps the recognition that "we never had Paris" can help us move beyond the status quo, beyond the platitudes that the next generation will solve the problem, and beyond the idea that there is no alternative to the current international climate regime.

As Gardiner indicates, the challenges are great, and a massive mobilization is required. A global constitutional convention has significant potential, but the forces of the perfect moral storm may recapitulate themselves unless those who are currently empowered commit to a substantial shift in orientation. A push from the grassroots, with mobilization at many scales, will likely be needed. New forms of solidarity are critical, and those of us who are well positioned to effect change need to come to terms with our own moral ambivalence and work with others to (re)develop values and pathways that provide future generations the possibility of living well in a warming world (cf. Thompson 2010).

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