

Proposition 1: Runaway emissions

- We are currently accelerating hard into the most serious global environmental problem that humanity has ever faced. If the scientists are to be believed, the planet is at serious risk of a shift in global climate comparable in magnitude to an ice age (albeit in the other direction), but occurring over decades rather than millennia. Yet, despite more than twenty years of awareness, we are neither slowing down nor stabilizing, let alone actually reducing, our collective input to the problem. Instead, we continue to add more fuel to the fire, faster and faster, producing an almost exponential rise in anthropogenic emissions of carbon. That, arguably, is the most striking fact of our time.

Proposition 2: A dubious framing

- In public discussion, we do not understand the striking fact in the most relevant terms, and so conceive of the problem in the wrong way. The dominant discourses about the nature of climate change are scientific and economic. But the deepest challenge is ethical. What matters most is what we do to protect those vulnerable to our actions and unable to hold us accountable, especially the global poor, future generations, and nonhuman nature.

Proposition 3: A profound challenge

- Our problem is profoundly global, intergenerational, and theoretical. When these factors come together they pose a "perfect moral storm" for ethical action. This casts doubt on the adequacy of our existing institutions, and our moral and political theories.

Proposition 4: A problematic paradigm

- In the environmental discourse, the presence of the perfect moral storm is obscured by the dominance and pervasiveness of an alternative, narrower analysis. According to this account, climate change is a paradigmatically global problem best understood as a prisoner's dilemma or tragedy of the commons played out between nation states who adequately represent the interests of their citizens in perpetuity. However, such models assume away many of the main issues, and especially the intergenerational aspect of the climate problem. Hence, they are inadequate in this case, and perhaps many others. This point has theoretical as well as practical implications.

Proposition 5: A threatened discourse

- In the perfect moral storm, our position is not that of idealized neutral observers, but rather judges in our own case, with no one to properly hold us accountable. This makes it all too easy to slip into weak and self-serving ways of thinking, supported by a convenient apathy or ideological fervor. Moreover, the devices of such corruption are sophisticated, and often function indirectly, by infiltrating the terms of ethical and epistemic argument.

Proposition 6: Shadow solutions

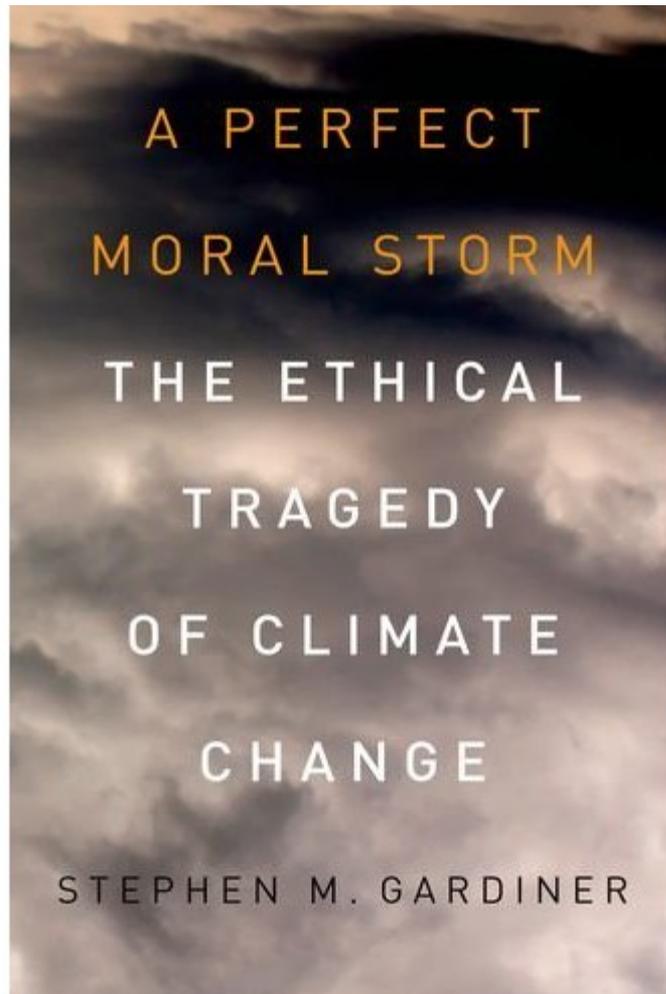
- Given this, we are susceptible to proposals for action that do not respond to the real problem. This provides a good explanation of what has gone wrong in the last two decades of climate policy, from Rio to Kyoto to Copenhagen. However, the form of such "shadow solutions" is likely to evolve as a the situation deteriorates. Some recent arguments for pursuing geoengineering may represent such an evolution.

Proposition 7: A defensive strategy

- The perfect storm constitutes a nonneutral evaluative setting, and this poses special challenges for ethical action. Because we are judges in our own case, there is a role for "defensive" moral and political philosophy, especially in the public sphere. In particular, we should work as hard at identifying bad arguments, policies, and theories as on developing the good; and we must pay attention to the ways important values are articulated, since the likelihood of perversion is high.

Proposition 8: Early guidance

- Although the theoretical component of the perfect moral storm is serious, it does not follow that nothing useful can be said about confronting the ethical challenge. Instead, there are serious constraints on moral and political reasoning involving many of the main aspects of the climate problem, such as scientific uncertainty, intergenerational ethics, and intragenerational justice. Paying attention to these suggests that the current public debate about climate should be reoriented.



- From the preface to:
Gardiner, Stephen. *The Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*. New York; Oxford University Press. 2011.
- Available in Environment Canada's NCR library (GE 42 G37) and Downsview library (GE 42 G37 2011)