

Chapter 41

Why We Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change... And Why We Are Wired to Take Action

Through our long evolution, we have inherited fundamental and universal cognitive wiring that shapes the way that we see the world and interpret threats and that motivates us to act on them. Without doubt, climate change has qualities that play poorly to these innate tendencies. It is complex, unfamiliar, slow moving, invisible, and intergenerational. Of all the possible combinations of loss and gain, climate change contains the most challenging: requiring certain short-term loss in order to mitigate against an uncertain longer-term loss.

Climate change also challenges and reverses some deeply held assumptions. We are told that the way of life that we associate with our comfort and the protection of our families is now a menace; that gases we have believed to be benign are now poisonous; that our familiar environment is becoming dangerous and uncertain.

Our social intelligence is well attuned to keeping track of debts and favors, and ensuring equitable distribution of gains and losses. Climate change poses a major challenge here too, with all solutions requiring that rival social groups agree on a distribution of losses and thereafter the allocation of a greatly diminished shared atmospheric commons.

We are best prepared to anticipate threats from other humans. We are inordinately skilled at identifying social allies and enemies, identifying the social cues that define loyalty to our group and that identify the members of rival out-groups. Climate change is immensely challenging in terms of these categorizations. It is not caused by an external enemy with obvious intention to cause harm. It therefore tends to be fitted around existing enemies and their perceived intentions: a rival superpower, big government, intellectual elites, liberal environmentalists, fossil fuel corporations, lobbyists, right-wing think tanks, or social failings such as overconsumption, overpopulation, or selfishness.

Worse still, and unique among major threats, we all contribute directly through our own emissions and are therefore personally responsible for the ever-increasing costs for ourselves, our in-group, and our children and descendants. This moral challenge, combined with a sense of the relative powerlessness of individual action, helps mobilize a well-ingrained set of defense mechanisms that enables us to ignore the problem—both through personal disavowal and through socially constructed silence.

There is a fundamental division, embedded in the physical structure of our brain, into the analytic and the experiential processing systems— what I have called the *rational* brain and the *emotional* brain. The two brains work together on complex tasks, but the engagement of the emotional brain is critical for galvanizing action, especially at a social level. The

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differences between our rational and our emotional processing systems express themselves in a constant tension between the overly rational presentation of climate science and its translation by campaigners into emotionally appealing narratives.

The cognitive systems require that complex issues be converted into narratives which become the primary medium by which the issue and the social cues that guide attention are transmitted between people. Meaning is therefore created by the way we talk about it (or, I have suggested, the ways that we choose not to talk about it).

Stories and narratives have universal qualities, and we squeeze new information into these standard story patterns. We then justify these stories with reference to available recent experience—usually itself in the form of a socially generated story.

Climate change is, I suggest, exceptionally *multivalent*. It lends itself to multiple interpretations of causality, timing, and impact. This leaves it extremely vulnerable to our innate disposition to select or adapt information so that it confirms our preexisting assumptions—*biased assimilation* and *confirmation bias*. If climate change can be interpreted in any number of ways, it is therefore prone to being interpreted in the way that we choose.

These constructed narratives therefore contain the final reason why we can ignore climate change: they become so culturally specific that people who do not identify with their values can reject the issue they explain.

The narratives formed by the early adopters of the issue came to dominate and frame all subsequent discussion. The early focus on tailpipe emissions rather than wellhead production became a meta-frame that influenced all subsequent narratives concerning the definition of the problem, moral responsibility, and policy solutions.

As the issue matured, deniers became louder and stronger and created their own narratives that came to “pollute” the discourse. These built on and reacted to the existing narratives, often adopting and reworking their frames, to create compelling stories in which familiar enemies were motivated by self-interest to cause intentional harm.

As these narratives became repeated and shared within peer groups, they came to constitute a social proof. These reinforced the other social cues coming from the media and political elites. As the issue developed, these cues accumulated and powerful social feedbacks tended to amplify them, leading people to overestimate the consensus within their own social group and to alter or suppress their own opinion if it did not conform.

What is more, we are all active participants in this process, developing personal narratives that help us to manage the anxiety, moral challenge, and required sacrifices inherent in climate change by choosing to make it yet more distant, less certain, more hopeless, or less relevant to our own values. We even interpret the wider social norms to select the social

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cues that best reinforce our chosen position. That is to say that, even with the best intentions, we cannot help setting up narratives that are designed to fail against the very biases they are supposed to overcome.

There is, then, no single factor that leads people to ignore climate change. Anyone who suggests that there is will, inevitably, be fulfilling the *wicked* prophecy and defining the problem to support that conclusion. Rather, there is a set of interrelated negotiations between our personal self-interest and our social identity, in which we actively participate to shape climate change in ways that enable us to avoid it.

The bottom line is that we do not accept climate change because we wish to avoid the anxiety it generates and the deep changes it requires. In this regard, it is not unlike any other major threat. However, because it carries none of the clear markers that would normally lead our brains to overrule our short-term interests, we actively conspire with each other, and mobilize our own biases to keep it perpetually in the background.

. . . And Why We Are Wired To Take Action

Even with our limitations, humans can accept, understand, and take action on anything. We have immense capacity for pro-social, supportive, and altruistic behavior. Climate change is entirely within our capacity for change. It is challenging, but far from impossible.

Beyond immediate personal threats, we have no instinct stronger than the drive to defend the interests of our own descendants and social group. Climate change is not a minor inconvenience—even though some narratives shape it as such. It is an existential threat on a scale equaled only by nuclear war. It contains threats at every level: to our sense of place, our identity, our way of life, our expectations of the future, and our deepest instincts that lead us to protect our children and defend our tribe.

Nothing is contained within climate change that we are incapable of dealing with. Even though it presents itself in the form of a future threat, we have the capacity to anticipate threats, by giving them the narrative and cultural form that engages our emotional brain and by creating social institutions that sustain our response. We have a strong drive toward such collective enterprises, for they are one of the means by which we cope with the fear of our own mortality.

We also have a virtually unlimited capacity to accept things that might otherwise prove to be cognitively challenging once they are supported within a culture of shared conviction, reinforced through social norms, and conveyed in narratives that speak to our “sacred values.” These could just as readily lead us to action as lead us to inaction.

There is no single pathway from information to conviction. The cultural feedbacks that lead climate change to become more distant, uncertain, or hopeless could equally well work the other way by creating a social proof and legitimacy around accepting and taking action. The

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personal reward for action would then come from an intensified sense of belonging and the satisfaction that comes from contributing to a shared project. Climate change is the one issue that could bring us together and enable us to overcome our historic divisions. This, rather than the self-interest contained in the economic arguments, is the real reward of taking action.

The final proof that we are not inherently “wired” to ignore climate change—which should be self-evident—is that the majority of people, across the world, already accept that it is a major threat and might be prepared to support the necessary changes. They currently feel isolated and powerless, but could readily be mobilized if their concerns and hopes became validated within a community of shared conviction and purpose. Human history provides so many examples of social movements that have overcome apparently impossible obstacles that we know that we should be capable of meeting this challenge, providing that we move decisively.

But this is just one of the many pathways that are opening up in front of us. Climate change is not a static issue, and extreme weather events of entirely unprecedented scale and duration will continue to build. These events now occur within a cultural and political environment that has been thoroughly primed with socially charged beliefs. The critical questions for the future are how the increasing personal experience of extreme weather will interact with these existing narratives, and whether the result will be an increase or a decrease in our acceptance that our own behavior their underlying cause.