

DISMALNESS

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Given that people are quoting Professor Weitzman's work on risks of a very dismal outcome, there may be some interest in this letter (I don't seem to have a reply). It seems there are some logical problems with all of this costing of "unknown or unknowable" risks and that we risk just imposing costs on people for no good purpose (other than to feel good about doing so).

Dear Professor Weitzman

I was interested in the article in the latest Colloquy and wondered whether you had seen some of the criticisms of the science by Professor Bob Carter and others?

I attach a couple of articles. If you can explain to me why the critics are wrong I should be enlightened. I have not seen critiques of these articles or of other critics such as Professor Carter or Professor Pilmer.

It seems to me that that there are serious questions about:

1. the scientific facts (extrapolating back to find data thousands of years back is hard enough);
2. the scientific modelling (all models are subject to the GIGO principle and are abstractions from reality);
3. the economic modelling of costs and benefits (of doing nothing but adapt versus attempted mitigation);
4. the philosophical basis of weighing up the welfare of future generations (as I note below, democratic societies seem schizoid when it comes to future generations - Muslims and ultra-Orthodox Jews seem to want them but Western birth rates indicate we don't really want them anyway)

In relation to low risk but possibly catastrophic impacts and your model, on the logic of your model, why would I not stay indoors today and be safe (but die of starvation) rather than hopping into a car to do the shopping (and risk being killed by some crazed Christmas driver)? Isn't that a risk of greater importance to me which I deal with every day and take that risk? Why should I or anyone else alive today take a more precautionary approach to far more remote risks that may or may not affect other people hundreds of years away?

Meanwhile, I attach a Swiftian letter I sent to Scientific American.

The Editors
Scientific American

Dear Sirs

Leaving aside the cynical suspicion that “Climate Change” is the greatest money spinner for some people since the Y2K scare, John Broome’s “The Ethics of Climate Change” (Scientific American June 2008) raises some interesting questions. Why apply any discount rate at all? Why isn’t Stern’s 1.4% arbitrary? But if we do treat future generations equally in a utilitarian ethical calculus and apply a zero discount rate, doesn't a strictly logical utilitarian philosopher find himself out of a job? Assuming generations go on forever, with no discount rate, mankind's total utility is already infinite and it does not matter what this generation does about climate change or anything else. (That may be, by the way, a true reflection of the modern democratic process - if people really do care so much about future generations, it is hard to see why abortion has been legalized on a massive scale.)

Utilitarianism raises even more strange questions. Should people commit euthanasia to eliminate greenhouse gas emitting creatures called human beings (for the sake of unborn human beings)? Is a utilitarian ethic logically able to deal with these issues? (As a matter of law, utilitarianism was rejected by the House of Lords in the 19th century when it convicted some shipwrecked seamen of murdering a weak cabin boy whom they killed to eat and ensure survival of the rest.)

Perhaps the ethics of natural resources is better viewed as a question of natural rights and the Lockean proviso. If I have a right to do something, like breathe air while trapped in a coal mine even though it means less for all of us trapped down below, can anyone stop me? If I am on this planet by the grace of God who is to tell me I cannot breathe the air or make a fire to stay warm?

I would therefore be interested to see Mr Broome reformulate the question of the ethics of climate change in terms of "equal rights" to the Earth's resources between generations. This issue was a live one in the 19th century when Henry George and Herbert Spencer debated the ethics of land ownership. That debate seems relevant today.