

“It can’t be happening!”

– environmental denial, feedback loops and mindfulness

John Foster (PPR)

Nadine Andrews (HighWire DTC)

The case of the mirage deadline

- “[The Cancun summit] should be a wake-up call to the world! For if we do not manage to constrain carbon to the recommended level, we will...miss the opportunity to put the world on a pathway that does not hold a large potential for conflict.”

Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, 2011

- “The 400ppm threshold is a sobering milestone, and should serve as a wake-up call for all of us to support clean energy technology and reduce emissions of greenhouse gases before it’s too late...”

Tim Lueker, researcher with Scripps CO₂ Group, April 2013

- “[The IPCC’s Fifth Framework Report] is another wake-up call that our activities today will have a profound impact on society, not only for us, but for many generations to come”.

*Michel Jarraud, Secretary General,
World Meteorological Organisation, September 2013*



The Vicious Syllogism

- ***Premise 1:*** If we do not keep average atmospheric temperature rise to $\leq 2^{\circ}\text{C}$ above pre-industrial levels, we are in for dangerous and destructive climate change.
- ***Premise 2:*** If we do not keep further anthropogenic emissions of CO₂ e to (say) $\leq 1,300$ billion tonnes, we shall not keep average atmospheric temperature rise to $\leq 2^{\circ}\text{C}$.
- ***Premise 3:*** If we are not *now* seriously embarked on a feasible programme for such limitation, we shall not keep further anthropogenic emissions of CO₂ e to (say) $\leq 1,300$ billion tonnes.
- ***Premise 4:*** We are not now seriously embarked on such a programme.
- ***Conclusion:*** We are [*already*] in for dangerous and destructive climate change.

Varieties of denial

(of something tacitly recognised as a cause for concern)

- ***Literal***

There's nothing the matter .

- ***Interpretive***

It's not actually that serious, if we look at it a bit differently.

- ***Implicatory***

OK, it's serious – let's not go there.

Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial*, (Polity, 2001)

In relation to climate change...

Standard deniers deny:

- ***Premise 1:*** If we do not keep average atmospheric temperature rise to $\leq 2^{\circ}\text{C}$ above pre-industrial levels, we are in for dangerous and destructive climate change.
- or*
- ***Premise 2:*** If we do not keep further anthropogenic emissions of CO_2e to (say) $\leq 1,300$ billion tonnes, we shall not keep average atmospheric temperature rise to $\leq 2^{\circ}\text{C}$.
- or even*
- ***Premise 4:*** We are not now seriously embarked on a programme to do that.

Standard denial

- **Literal**

 - Contrarians**

 - Corporations with vested interests**

- **Interpretive**

 - Lomborg et al.**

 - Sustainability optimists, ecological modernisers,
'Natural capitalism'...**

- **Implicatory**

 - Most of us**

Activist deniers deny :

Not

- ***Premise 1:*** If we do not keep average atmospheric temperature rise to $\leq 2^{\circ}\text{C}$ above pre-industrial levels, we are in for dangerous and destructive climate change.

nor

- ***Premise 2:*** If the world does not keep further anthropogenic emissions of CO_2 e to (say) $\leq 1,300$ billion tonnes, we shall not keep average atmospheric temperature rise to $\leq 2^{\circ}\text{C}$.

nor

- ***Premise 4:*** We are not now seriously embarked on such a programme.

But

- ***Premise 3:*** If we are not *now* seriously embarked on a feasible programme for such limitation, we shall not keep further anthropogenic emissions of CO_2 e to (say) $\leq 1,300$ billion tonnes.

Activist denial

- **Literal**

**Neo-environmentalists (Lynas,
Breakthrough Institute)**

- **Interpretive**

Adopt different metrics (Rockstrom et al.)

- **Implicatory**

Mitigate for 2°C but adapt for 4°C

Political pragmatism

'Rewilding'

Compare Appeasement in the 1930s?

“The Prime Minister had declared that Sanctions meant war; secondly, he was resolved there must be no war; and, thirdly, he decided upon Sanctions. ...Under the guidance of Britain and the pressures of Laval the League of Nations Committee charged with devising Sanctions, kept clear of any that would provoke war...the measures pressed with so great a parade were not real sanctions to paralyse the aggressor, but merely such half-hearted sanctions as the aggressor would tolerate...The League of Nations therefore proceeded to the rescue of Abyssinia on the basis that nothing must be done to hamper the invading Italian armies.”

**Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*,
vol.1, pp.157-8**

Standard denial

- **Literal**

**Hitler and Mussolini represent no threat.
(Rothermere's *Daily Mail*)**

- **Interpretive**

**Their demands can be seen as reasonable, and so
should be placated.
(Geoffrey Dawson's *Times* editorials)**

- **Implicatory**

**“ A far-away country” containing “people of whom
we know nothing.”
(Chamberlain on Czechoslovakia)**

Activist denial...?

- “Once Hitler’s Germany had been allowed to rearm...a second World War was almost certain.”
(Churchill, op. cit.)
- ...so we work *still harder and more urgently* to ensure that peace prevails...?
- **Compare:** Everything we believe implies that it is too late to prevent dangerous and destructive climate change, except our belief that it *can’t* be too late.

**What could possibly push
denial in this way to the
very limits of
intelligibility?**