



# WHY WE DISAGREE ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Understanding Controversy, Inaction  
and Opportunity

Mike Hulme

CAMBRIDGE

## Why We Disagree about Climate Change

*Mike Hulme*

Download now

Read Online 

# Why We Disagree about Climate Change

Mike Hulme

## Why We Disagree about Climate Change Mike Hulme

Climate change is not 'a problem' waiting for 'a solution'. It is an environmental, cultural and political phenomenon which is re-shaping the way we think about ourselves, our societies and humanity's place on Earth. Drawing upon twenty-five years of professional work as an international climate change scientist and public commentator, Mike Hulme provides a unique insider's account of the emergence of this phenomenon and the diverse ways in which it is understood. He uses different standpoints from science, economics, faith, psychology, communication, sociology, politics and development to explain why we disagree about climate change. In this way he shows that climate change, far from being simply an 'issue' or a 'threat', can act as a catalyst to revise our perception of our place in the world. Why We Disagree About Climate Change is an important contribution to the ongoing debate over climate change and its likely impact on our lives.

## Why We Disagree about Climate Change Details

Date : Published May 1st 2009 by Cambridge University Press (first published 2009)

ISBN : 9780521727327

Author : Mike Hulme

Format : Paperback 392 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Environment, Climate Change, Science, Academic, Sociology, Sustainability, Politics, Psychology, History



[Download Why We Disagree about Climate Change ...pdf](#)



[Read Online Why We Disagree about Climate Change ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online Why We Disagree about Climate Change Mike Hulme**

---

## From Reader Review Why We Disagree about Climate Change for online ebook

### Lydia says

The big-picture lesson of Hulme's book is that climate change is not a "problem" people are going to be able to "solve," it's a reality we are going to have to figure out ways to live and survive with as a species, which has unavoidable moral and ethical implications for policymakers and all living beings affected by their policies.

---

### Eric Brandstedt says

Mike Hulme is climate scientist who in this book has approached the phenomenon of climate change from quite a different point of view: a cultural rather than natural one. He argues that in order to grapple with climate change it is not enough to perceive it as an empirical problem, discovered by climate scientists and to be solved by the political community. Instead we must bring resources from the philosophy of science, economics, psychology, sociology and religion among other subjects. We need to know how climate change (as an idea) figure in people's radically different world-views, how values influence (risk-)perception and decision-making. To understand the deadlock that persists over the political question on climate change abatement this is a most promising approach. Somewhat provocatively, Hulme also argues that climate change is not A problem in the first place, and thus naturally cannot be solved either. This is not to give up, or to give in to relativism/radically scepticism. He is merely reminding - scientists, politicians, and environmentalists in particular I would guess - of the obvious fact that the changing climate has always been our environment and that it plays various roles in our respective lives. Instead of setting up Climate Change (he uses capital letters to denote the idea of climate change rather than the physical phenomenon) as a clear-cut problem which must be solved with one big solution (we have tried and failed in doing that), Climate Change is something that each one of us must relate to in our individual lives. Depending on ones set of values and beliefs it will figure differently. From these individualised (or at least, particularised) point of views Climate Change abatement can be motivated by attaching its importance to cherished convictions. As such, we need "mobilising narratives" to motivate the concerted action that is much needed. Being a philosopher writing about climate change much of Hulme's spirit and approach is familiar to me. I agree with the major thrust of it too - with the reservation that I believe that his discussion of values and ethics would be better served without the religious overcoat. For a scholar in the humanities or social sciences this book may not be revolutionising, but it may be a needed shake up for others.

---

### Daniella says

This book is well-written and fairly understandable. It's written for the intelligent public rather than targeted toward the academicians. It presents a new perspective on climate change by the phrase (not verbatim): "it's not about what climate change can do for you, it's about what climate change can do for us." Interesting, huh? His arguments are compelling, but I don't necessarily agree.

As a by-product of his argument, Hulme educates us about the definition of climate change through the eyes of different people, for example, politicians, scientists, the general public.

---

## benebean says

so I started reading this book as it was recommended by a friend to be a good explanation of how humans caused global warming. Previously I had read Unstoppable Global Warming: Every 1,500 Years that made a pretty good case for the global warming is not man made. Unstoppable Global warming: Every 1,500 Years was stuffed with scientific studies conducted by respected scientists (prestigious prize winners from elite universities). So far not impressed with this book though. It's begun with a lengthy and as far as I can tell, pointless discussion of the definition of climate including things like how historically various cultures have felt about the concept of climate, or is climate really a sentient being like mother Gaia. Also I can't help but be wary the author is about to pull one of the philosopher's tricks where they spit out some conclusion that by normal peoples' definitions sounds like they reached some exciting revelation, but when you find out they redefined the terms, actually means nothing-- like saying "you can lose weight while still eating all the chocolate you want" then finding out they defined "eating chocolate as staring at pictures of chocolate but never ingesting any."

---

## Blair says

### Why I Disagree about “Post-Normal” Science

Is scientific method the only way we can understand the climate change issue? Or do we also need the help of idealistic and spiritual thinking? This book, written by a climate scientist, comes up with a few surprising and dubious answers.

The author, like most informed scientists, thinks that climate change will have a significant negative impact, with the uncertainty only about how much. If you personally have some doubts, remember for a moment that is what the author believes. Now consider the great revelation of this book:

*“Climate change is not a problem, it is an opportunity to alter the way we arrive at and achieve our personal aspirations and our collective social goals.”*

There are two ways to interpret this statement. The first that may come to mind is: *This is an opportunity to force our collectivist social ideology onto society using the pretext of a climate crisis* (as in Naomi Klein's This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate). After reading the book, I think the author inclines toward something a little different that I will paraphrase as: *A drought that kills millions in Africa will inspire some of us in the affluent West to rethink our materialistic ways. After the Age of Aquarius dawns and we have achieved our personal aspirations, then maybe we can get around to doing something about the climate.*

A third option might be that studying the climate change issue can give us insight into how science works and how different people in society react to it. That was my hope, but I was disappointed. The thesis of this book is profoundly offensive. There is nothing good about a problem that might do us harm, unless you hate humanity.

Perhaps the root of the problem can be seen in his discussion on the nature of scientific knowledge. He

prefers to lift his ideas from modern philosophers rather than tell us about his personal experience as a working scientist, which does not make for productive reading.

He helpfully starts with the fundamental question of the nature of reality. Positivism holds that reality is independent of human consciousness and is external, material and objective. Constructivism claims reality is subjective, and truth is a construction that is located within our own personal experience. In plain language, one is science and the other is fantasy, believing what you want to believe. The confusion comes from the fact that of course science is done by fallible people, who perceive the world through their preconceptions. The point of scientific method is to overcome these biases to arrive at an ever-improving approximation of the truth. The point of constructivism is the kind of self indulgence this book is guilty of.

Our author does not see it that way, saying, *“It is no longer possible to see scientific knowledge as the neutral outcome of a steadily advancing pursuit of an objective and universal truth.”* He cites Thomas Kuhn’s work on scientific revolutions as evidence. In fact, Kuhn showed that science advances at an uneven rate, individual scientists can be resistant to change, and science as a whole would advance more quickly if every scientist were perfectly rational. The existence of imperfect scientists does not invalidate the concept of an objective and universal truth.

He is setting up the demise of so-called Normal Science, defined as *“skepticism, universalism, communalism, and disinterestedness.”* I assume that “communalism” here means there is a single reality we observe in common, and “disinterestedness” is a clumsy word for objective (unless scientists really are a bunch of bored communists). But now he tells us we are entering the brave new world of Post-Normal Science, where facts are uncertain, the stakes are high, and decisions urgent. Does this sound like part of the post-modern project to replace objective reality with the subjective (or constructivist) fantasies of an intellectual elite?

Uncertainty is nothing new. High stakes and urgent decisions should not affect how the physical sciences are practiced. The results of this science should be fed into the political process. It is advocating influence in the other direction that amounts to a celebration of the politicization of science.

There is more. He says science must concede ground to ‘other ways’ of knowing. An example he gives is indigenous knowledge of drought management. Such local knowledge is said to challenge scientific universalism. Nonsense. If that knowledge is based on centuries of observation, and can be confirmed by modern scientific method, then it is a legitimate part of a single universal science. There is no valid ‘other way’. On the question of the authority of science, he even asks, *“Does it matter if Al Gore gets some aspects of the science wrong?”* Yes, it does matter to those of us still stuck in the old fashioned world of Normal Science.

But he also says that scientists should strive to eliminate bias and prejudice, the process and data must be open to public scrutiny, and uncertainty must be clearly communicated. Maybe he simply cannot distinguish the boundary between science and politics. I suggest he is trying to create an opening for the idealistic thinking that comes next in the book. But an opening in the integrity of science is a gaping wound subject to all kinds of infection.

Much of the book is taken up with the idealistic thinking he seems to favor over *“our science-saturated but spiritually impoverished wisdom.”* He presents a number of ways the philosophers use to categorize the different ways people think, including the myths by which we understand climate change. I think it can be boiled down to two main categories.

One is the sanctity of nature, whether because it is God's creation or the modern environmentalist substitute. Michael Creighton describes the latter more succinctly (and cynically): *We started with the paradise of Eden, a state of grace and unity with nature. Then we fell from grace into a state of pollution, by eating from the tree of technology. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die in the Apocalypse, unless we seek salvation in the sustainability of the church of the environment.* Our author is much nicer, and uses a lot more words to arrive at what amounts to the same conclusion. He reports that some of these people object to a carbon tax because it treats atmosphere as a commodity that can be sold to private interests. So these idealists would prefer it to have zero value?

The other notion is that of equity, or 'distributional justice'. *"All techno-fixes will create the next generation of crisis, because they ignore the fundamental problems of capitalism as a system that ignores injustice and promotes inequity."* Again, don't bother doing anything real until we achieve somebody's fantasy of a perfect world. The Kyoto Protocol is an example of this kind of thinking, where the goal of 'distributional justice' undermined the reasonable emission reductions it proposed.

This book was written just before the so-called "Climategate" controversy erupted, when e-mail correspondence between climate scientists was stolen from the University of East Anglia. Still, it is surprising that the "we" who disagree about climate change does not address those who question the science itself. Skeptics such as Michael Creighton and Bjørn Lomborg are only briefly mentioned as if they were academic curiosities. I would have liked more insight into the many different reasons people have for being suspicious of what climate science tells us. In short, I would have liked a better book.

Perhaps I am being too negative. I was put off by what I see as undermining the integrity of science, and the notion that the climate change problem is somehow good for our souls. I can never tell when he is simply reporting the news, or feeding us his beliefs. Even a relatively good chapter on "The Discovery of Global Warming" gives the impression that science ended in 1987, and then degenerates into the sociology of public opinion.

Those skeptical of global warming are going to have their beliefs about the politicization of science confirmed by what they read here. But just because this one guy thought he had to write this book does not mean he represents all climate scientists. One could just as well conclude that being a believing Christian (which the author is) interferes with the ability to practice good science. Perhaps the best insight in the book is that people will select their favorite climate change myth so they can believe what they want to believe. Which is probably what you, the reader, are doing right now.

There is some worthwhile information and analysis in this book, and certainly a lot to think about. The best I can say is that it provided plenty of material that needs to be subjected to critical thinking. I suggest you skip this book, and instead read George Marshall's *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*.

---

### **Susan Subak says**

The author divides the world into four types of people as respects a perspective on climate change. Although originally skeptical of such generalizations, I found myself convinced by his typology and could assign most of my friends into the categories. The author does a better job of organizing his material than is typical for a treatise on such a large topic and I found his critique of international treaties and broad policy approaches well done though I didn't need convincing due to my own experience with these fora. I think that it would

have been a stronger work if he had found something to lead up to that was relevant to REDUCING emissions rather than limiting himself to a broad argument about personalizing climate change.

---

### **Angus Mcfarlane says**

There is no doubt that we disagree about climate change. There are many who think we shouldn't disagree, either because they are themselves convinced and can't see how others could not be, or in a moral sense, feel that the risk obligates us to put differences aside. And in the narrow literal sense, I don't think anyone believes that climate doesn't, and isn't, changing but the implied sense that humans are responsible and therefore need to respond, is far from settled. If it were, we would have international agreements in place, for starters.

The main concern, however, is not why we disagree about the science, although this is touched on of course. Hulme is not a 'denialist' or 'skeptic'. But rather than polarize groups into believers and heathen, he recognises that there are issues in the climate discussion which go beyond 'normal' science. Likewise, the debate implies science can be authoritatively governed, which to a large extent it can't be.

Moving on from purely physical aspects then, the remaining 7 of 10 chapters, deal with other aspects of disagreement. How we assess risk, how we model economics and how we assign value; how we govern ourselves, what we believe (morally and religiously) all come into consideration. As a result, deciding what to do is far from simple. An example of why this is given by the consideration of large scale geoengineering. If such measures were required because carbon could not be controlled, and even if we could guarantee their success (scary), whose climate would we optimize? The Russians and Canadians might enjoy a longer growing season, but I doubt Australians would be content with the risk of additional warmth that results.

There is an inevitability about disagreement that I found disappointing, but it is hard to refute Hulme's reasoning. In his concluding chapter, an 'optimistic' way forward is presented, saying that despite the near impossibility of universal agreement, we are at least placing environment in a prominent place in our discussions. If we can begin to see our place, humbly, within rather than above, our world, we will make progress. His conclusion many will find satisfactory I feel, as his arguments become more philosophical - I am not sure I did.

Apart from some repetition, the book is tightly written and well researched and argued. An important discussion which goes beyond some of the nitty gritty to give a bigger picture perspective.

---

### **Philip Chaston says**

Hulme's exposition on the uses and confusions of climate change is valuable in as much as demonstrating that uncertainty is not just a tool of the sceptics. However, as a social constructivist and cultural theorist, the text veers into models and streams that provide little confidence or material on the development of this monster. There are useful insights on the development of the term, its deployment in policy and the ethical underpinnings of activists from anarchistic and authoritarian ends.

Whilst in disagreement with its conclusions, Hulme shows that the debate is wider and more nuanced than

the media outbursts encouraged by the Left and the Right. But, at the end of the day, it still comes down to the science.

---

### **Witkinddavis says**

Mike Hulme sees climate change as a wicked problem in a newly wicked web of communications, where experts are doubted and interaction between various publics and scientists is not always marked by cooperative dialogue. Hulme, who is himself convinced that human beings are reshaping the environment in a dangerous way, casts a wide intellectual net, examining the social meanings of climate change, differing values, beliefs, fears and how risk is communicated. Among his conclusions is a warning that it doesn't help to talk about climate change to doubters in catastrophic terms. *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* was an education for a reader who is schooled to pursue what Hulme calls a "technocratic" approach to the relationship between science and public policy. The decision rule I would like to see applied to climate change is to minimize the probability of maximum loss. It's not happening, and it's worth reading the book to better understand why.

---

### **Robert Wechsler says**

An incredible book that should be a template not for environmental books, but for books on almost any topic. This is one of the most important books I've ever read. Here's a summing up:

"Let us at least recognize that the sources of our disagreement about climate change lie deep within us, in our values and in our sense of identity and purpose. ... Our disagreements should, at best, always lead us to learn more about ourselves – our lament for the past, our fear for the future, our desire for control, and our instinct for justice."

---

### **Tyler says**

Read for class. Reads more like a cultural studies textbook than a non-fiction book. Especially since it is broken into sub chapters 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, etc. I the the Hulme had quite a lot to say about the topic of climate change without talking much about the actual problems associated with climate change. That is a bit of a relief because I feel like I could recite a list of 1,000 things. 4/5 because it felt too long at times.

---

### **Kirsten says**

This is a perfect example of a book that I often didn't agree with and had quite a few criticisms for but still found very worthwhile and enjoyable to read. As a way of complicating the narrative of climate change it does a very good job and provided a lot of food for thought. However, as other reviewers have pointed out, it should be read with a critical eye. I feel that in trying to complicate the narrative he struck out too far from climate change as a challenge (or network of challenges) to which science is the best available method for humans to rise. Of course we have to understand the sociological, economic, moral and other dimensions of the problem in a more nuanced way, but there are discreet problems to meet and science and technology

attuned to sociological needs are already meeting some of them. I was left in some doubt whether the author was willing to acknowledge that point. All the same, it was a very interesting read and I will seek out some of the recommended reading from each chapter.

---

### **John says**

Excellent and thoughtful book by a British climate scientist which suggests (with much detailed discussion) that debates about climate change are often less about "scientific facts" and more proxies for our values, concerns, aspirations or fears. The central focus of the book is not on the science of "anthropogenic global warming" (though the first couple of chapters give an excellent history) but on how the \*idea\* of climate change bears on human assumptions about nature, rationality, government and "what the human project is ultimately about".

---

### **Laura says**

I was fortunate enough to take a course with Dr. Hulme during my Master's degree, and this book was the center of the course. It talks a lot about different framings of climate change and how we perceive risk in those different framings. The one thing that really stuck with me (I'm pretty sure its in the the book) is that many Americans don't believe in climate change because in the US we STILL call it global warming and so when temperatures drop all of a sudden global warming doesn't make sense. It's all about framing it correctly.

---

### **Thomas says**

Seven ways in which we disagree about climate change

#### **1. Science**

Three limits to science that we must recognize. First, scientific knowledge about climate change will always be incomplete. Second, what counts as scientific knowledge for public decision making is not necessarily the same knowledge that first emerged in the laboratory. It is translated, negotiated, and reshaped by social forces as it moves into the public policy realm.

#### **2. Economics**

GDP is limited to goods and services that have a market value. As an overall indicator of wealth, human well-being, and environmental health, GDP is completely inadequate. Using it as the sole measure of economic growth or as a proxy for "social progress" distorts public policy.

#### **3. Religion**

Even if we agree that we have a moral obligation to care for creation, that doesn't tell us who is most responsible and what the appropriate collective actions should be.

#### **4. Psychology**

One of the reasons we disagree about climate change is because we evaluate risks differently. Why it's tough to convey the danger we face-- While climate change may kill millions, it will be on the death certificate of

no one.

## 5. Media

One of the reasons we disagree about climate change is that we receive multiple and conflicting messages about climate change and we interpret them in different ways.

## 6. Development

One of the reasons we disagree about climate change is that we understand development differently.

## 7. Governance

One of the reasons we disagree about climate change is that we seek to govern differently.

### **Our notion of "climate" is a constructed idea**

p3 Climate cannot be experienced directly through our senses. Neither can climate be measured directly by our instruments.

### **Morality of climate**

p13 The relationship between God and climate, especially drought, portrayed in the early Jewish scriptures, for example, reveals a particular reading of weather extremes.

p14 Although the theological language may have changed, Western societies continue to be attracted to the idea of moralizing the performance of climate.

p15 El Nino was named after the Christ child.

### **Controlling and modifying nature is an enduring idea**

p25 The idea that our climate can be modified and controlled ('conquered') is one of the major prevailing themes of the past 2000 years.

p38 Enlightenment discourses about climate change from the 17th century onwards frequently concentrated on the effects of deforestation.

"I am terrified by the hubris, conceit, the arrogance implied by words like "managing the planet" and "stabilizing the climate." Who are we to claim that we can manage the planet? We cannot even manage ourselves!"

### **What is the ultimate performance metric for the human species, what is it that we are seeking to optimise?**

### **Metaphors for understanding climate change**

#### 1. Lamenting Eden (nostalgia)

The myth of Eden, born of nostalgia, tells us of our desire-- even yearning-- to return to some simpler era. In the lament for Eden we are telling ourselves that in the active shaping of our climate we have appropriated god-like powers, yet they are powers we are uncomfortable with.

#### 2. Presaging Apocalypse (fear)

The myth of Apocalypse, born of fear, tells us of our worry about the future. No longer is it the capricious climate gods whom we need to respect and appease, but it is ourselves and our voracious appetite for material consumption that we now fear. We have lost the sense of transcendence and gratitude that once offered restraint, and we do not know where to re-locate it.

#### 3. Constructing Babel (pride)

"Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we might make a name

for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the Earth." Excessive self-confidence and the desire to dominate.

The myth of Babel, born of pride, tells us of our desire for mastery and control. We have always exercised this instinct over our fellow human beings and our fellow creatures. Climate change now offers us a global domain over which we can create new instruments and institutions of control, but it is a domain and a project in which we will never reach our hubristic goal of the ideal state.

#### 4. Celebrating Jubilee (justice)

In the Old Testament that every fifty years, soil, slaves and debtors should be liberated from their oppression. "In this way you shall set the 50th year apart and proclaim freedom to all the inhabitants of the land." Leviticus 25:10

The myth of Jubilee, born of justice, tells us of the inescapable call for humans to respond to injustice. Climate change opens out for us new ways of understanding the wilful and structural causes of inequality and injustice in the world, and challenges our instinct to respond.

**The emphasis on consumption, economics, and policy usually fails to engage people at any deep level because it does not address the narrative, the mythological, the metaphorical or the existence of memories of past disasters and the way out.**

---