

# Mental blocks contribute to our inaction on climate change

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**OPINION** : The future of our species is under threat – yet we choose not to recognise the danger

IT'S REASSURING to imagine we are, by and large, rational beings who base our judgments and decisions on the best evidence we can muster.

The scientific evidence suggests otherwise.

Nowhere can the limits of human rationality be more forcefully encountered than in how we have collectively failed to respond to the existential threat posed by climate change.

Recessions threaten our jobs and income, while fears about terrorism or crime may undermine our sense of well-being. Climate change is uniquely different in that at its heart, it threatens to unravel our most fundamental assumption: that we, as individuals, indeed, as a species, have a future at all.

If this comes as a surprise, you are by no means alone. “We have Palaeolithic emotions, medieval institutions and God-like technologies,” is how noted Harvard biologist EO Wilson framed our dilemma. Many scientists suspect the general public is too wedded to magical thinking and heuristic reasoning to truly grasp the implications of what climate science has been spelling out with ever-greater urgency for the last two decades. This is at best a limited explanation.

Evidence from behavioural and brain sciences points to the fact that “the human moral judgment system is not well equipped to identify climate change – a complex, large-scale and unintentionally caused phenomenon – as an important moral imperative”, according to a recent article in the science journal, *Nature Climate Change*.

The researchers identified key reasons why, despite the mountains of hard scientific evidence, we have signally failed to react to the colossal threats posed by climate change.

First, our moral intuitions are strongly driven by emotional responses. For instance, witnessing someone injure a child evokes a powerful visceral moral response. Climate change also threatens our children, but understanding exactly how “requires cold, cognitively demanding and ultimately less motivating moral reasoning”.

Second, the harms arising from pollution and resource depletion are a real but largely unintended by-product of economic activity. Neuroscientific evidence shows that we react much less to actions, however dangerous, if we see them as unintentional. Third, thinking about environmental damage makes us all squirm a little, as we know deep down that our flat-screen TVs, foreign holidays and affluent lifestyles are part of the problem. “To allay negative recriminations, individuals often engage in biased cognitive processes to minimise perceptions of their own complicity.”

In other words, we try to deflect our own feelings of guilt by decrying “corrupt” scientists and, by clutching to trivial errors or controversies, hope to reason away incontrovertible evidence amassed by teams of scientists of the calibre of those remotely operating the Mars rover.

Another roadblock is moral tribalism. People who identify themselves as liberals base their moral priorities around harm and fairness, while conservatives strongly value in-group loyalty, respect for authority and purity/sanctity. People's group identification strongly colours their views on political issues, and once a

position takes hold, confirmation bias means we seek out views that support our own and readily dismiss alternate explanations.

This explains how the deliberate politicisation of the science of climate change has allowed many otherwise intelligent, educated people (most notably, conservative white males) to reject objective scientific facts from credible sources in favour of shabby but reassuring conspiracy theories.

The final factor at work is the perception that climate change is a threat that affects others who live elsewhere – either people in distant countries or from future generations. We can easily frame them as out-group members, somehow different from us and, so, less deserving of our concern.

Helpfully, the researchers also developed pointers for communicators to bolster the recognition of climate change as a profound moral imperative. First, they suggest using moral frameworks that appeal to conservatives as much as liberals. Framing environmental damage as profaning creation has traction with some religious conservatives.

Next, psychologists have established that messages focusing on the likely future burdens of unmitigated climate change, from severe weather and coastal inundation to the spread of diseases, are more effective than “selling” the idea of potential future benefits, such as a stable climate. Of course, blunt messaging about the risks of climate change can backfire, with some individuals simply “tuning out” such warnings. Linking action on climate change to positive moral emotions such as pride and gratitude can provoke a pro-social response that rewards respondents with feelings of well-being.

How we discuss the likely victims of climate change matters too. A phrase like “future generations” sounds hollow, but when that becomes “my children or grandchildren”, these victims are no longer quite so faceless or forgettable.

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