

The Globalist

Errors of commission versus errors of omission

April 1st, 2015

Climate Shock: Will We Persist in Collective and Willful Blindness?

By Gernot Wagner and Martin L. Weitzman

Know what moral philosophers call the “[trolley problem](#)”? Should you push a man over the bridge to stop a trolley that would otherwise kill one or more innocent bystanders?

The moral of the story is always the same. If the tradeoff involves a one-to-one ratio, errors of commission are worse than errors of omission. Pushing one man to his death is worse than standing by and allowing the trolley to kill an innocent bystander.

Economists typically don't take as firm a moral stance as philosophers, but they, too, draw a clear distinction between the two kinds of actions.

Economists rather dispassionately call them “Type I errors” and “Type II errors.” The first is acting when action was not warranted, actively doing something wrong: An error of commission. The second is not acting when action was warranted, or failing to actively do something right: An error of omission.

Many of us are painfully aware of that distinction. It's one reason why we would rather stick with the default choice given to us in many situations.

Errors of commission or omission on a global level

Once you shift from the immediate and personal to the long-term and global, you multiply the potential for harm — and for confusion.

Among the many large public policy problems of our day, perhaps the most difficult to grapple with is global climate change. The problem is almost uniquely global, long-term, irreversible and uncertain.

Though the impacts of climate change will surely be severe, when and how they hit is far less sure.

Powerful, entrenched interests that are heavily invested in the status quo make it yet more difficult to formulate sensible climate policy solutions.

Add to that the moral questions around errors of commission versus omission, and implementing the right solution becomes harder still. The trolley problem, after all, teaches us that omitting action may be less bad than committing errors in acting.

Avoiding being blamed **ranks highly** in the minds of politicians.

But errors of commission surely cannot be ranked absolutely worse than errors of omission. Size matters, too. What if throwing the man over the bridge to stop the trolley does not just save one or two others but instead saves thousands? What about a million?

We cannot tell you where the cutoff is, just that there is one. At some point, a massive error of omission must outweigh a relatively small error of commission. That's clearly where we are with climate change.

The science points toward action

Science is clear on the fact that what we know ought to compel us to take action now. Most everything we do not know pushes us further still, pointing to the potential of massive further losses in lives and livelihoods alike.

Given the starting point almost everywhere in the world, any step toward a price of carbon of at least \$40 per ton of carbon dioxide would be a step in the right direction.

That \$40 is the U.S. government's current central estimate of the damages caused by one ton of carbon dioxide over its lifetime. Almost by definition, that number only counts what we know. The

right number would almost surely be much higher.

But even at the off chance that some action will have turned out to be a step too far, it would be a rather small mistake. We may end up with an economy that is more energy efficient and less carbon intensive than it really needed to be — a small potential error of commission.

The choice is clear

Our failure to enact climate policy can no longer be likened to an error of omission. The greenhouse effect is 19th century news. It had been discovered by 1824, shown in a laboratory by 1859 and quantified by 1896.

The term “global warming” itself has been around since 1975. The basic science has been settled for decades. Using our atmosphere as a sewer for our carbon emissions is uneconomic, unethical or worse.

All seven billion of us — especially the one billion or so high emitters responsible for most of the pollution — are committing errors of commission every single day.

No single person is responsible for any single climate change-related loss of property or loss of life, but collectively we all are. That holds particularly true for elected officials, who have no excuse not to know.

Failing to act, then, is not only an error of omission but indeed an error of commission. Another term for it — “willful blindness.”

Published by [The Globalist](#). Continue reading in [Climate Shock](#), available at booksellers everywhere.

Tagged: [Climate Shock](#), [featured](#), [Hard problem](#) [Soft thinking](#), [Market morals](#)

Share on:

