



Debunking the "I Can't Make Any Difference" Rationale for Inaction on Climate Change

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In 2007, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimated that the aviation industry boosts greenhouse gas emissions by two percent per year, and may increase global warming by up to three percent. Some people may shrug their shoulders and say, that's too little for company or industry efforts to cut back emissions to make much of a difference. Similarly, many people think that their own patterns of energy use matter only very slightly – so why bother to change? Individual nations can take the same stand, claiming that their contributions to global warming overall are too small to matter, for good or ill.

This "I won't bother because I can't make any difference" rationale for inaction in the face of a complex challenge is standard fare. We hear it all the time. But this idea is dead wrong. It's a bad argument, for three important reasons. The future is uncertain, and we cannot tell how our actions or non-actions now will shape different possible futures. Our choice, what each of us does or fails to do, interacts with and influences what others do. And our choices are expressions of our values and who we are. In the case at hand, do we want to be people who recognize and seek to counter global warming and the damage it causes to humans and nature? Or do we want to go down in history as pettifogging shirkers?

Individual Actions May Turn Out to Matter

To assume that individual actions – by a person or a nation – have negligible effects is to presume to know how others are going to act, to presume that everyone else's actions matter more than mine, and that others will not change what they are doing. But often we cannot be sure of these things. At the level of national politics, suppose it is argued that the United States should refuse to act unilaterally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, since the effects could be negligible if the Chinese and Indian governments refuse to take action. However, the U.S. Congress is not privy to the internal deliberations of the Chinese or Indian governments. In five years, it might turn out that they have taken action to bring about significant reductions, and the global targets could have been met if the United States had acted too. Similarly, among individuals, maybe I assume that recycling my garbage does not matter. In the real world, I could turn out to be part of something significant if others act, as they very well may. To rule out action on the basis of fixed expectations about how others will act is to surrender to fatalism.

What Each of Us Chooses to Do Can Influence Others

If actions that contribute to reducing emissions can be taken by me as an individual – or by a single neighborhood, city, company, industrial sector, or country – then the choice each makes serves as a signal to others. No one acts entirely alone and unseen by others, so each of us can hope to be a factor in encouraging others to act in similar ways. Of course, not all behaviors that chip away at dangerous emissions are equally visible or susceptible to being broadcast in strategic form. It may be hard to convey to others my decision to have shorter showers. But even this sort of small individual effort has been the subject of newspaper articles that can affect others' perceptions of changing social norms. Uncertainty in a world of social interactions provides room for individual initiatives of all kinds to make a real difference. The fundamental condition of politics is that we don't know whose action will prove effective in galvanizing others, or when, because we don't know everyone's dispositions or thresholds for taking action. It follows that there is always hope for an individual initiative to have a galvanizing effect. Cost-benefit calculations may still apply as each of us decides what to do. But we should all weigh into the equation the likelihood that our actions may affect what others do. We cannot just assume that what we do "won't make a difference" to anyone.

We Should Pursue What We Value

When it comes right down to it, the best reason of all to make certain choices is that they reflect our highest

values, our deepest sense of who we are and aspire to be. Identity and values matter, and give each of us reason to act accordingly, even if we remain uncertain about the concrete outcomes we might be able to bring about.

No person – or company or nation – should want to look back at earlier choices and say, well, we didn't bother to act on what we knew was best, because we were afraid that our efforts would have a negligible effect, would make no big difference. To admit that would be to acknowledge giving in to fear, inhibition, and fatalism. Not a pretty picture of our former selves. Alternatively, taking action may inspire others and change the future – and even if the changes fall short of accomplishing all that is necessary, we will have lived up to our values and made our best effort.

My point is well illustrated in the account given by industrialist and chief executive officer Ray C. Anderson about his decision to commit his carpet company, Interface, to pursuing a strategy of sustainability. Writing in his book *Mid-Course Correction: Toward a Sustainable Enterprise*, Anderson made the following case for taking a unilateral corporate initiative, rather than waiting for government to force all companies to act:

"What in turn will drive the creation of tax shifts and other politically derived financial instruments? It seems to me that those will ultimately be driven by a public with a high sense of ethics, morality, a deep-seated love of Earth, and a longing for harmony with nature. When the marketplace, the people, show their appreciation for these qualities and vote with their pocketbooks for the early adopters, the people will be leading; the "good guys" will be winning in the marketplace and the polling booth; the rest of the political and business leaders will have to follow."

Exactly the same reasoning applies to one individual taking the initiative, or to one nation stepping up to take the lead in reducing greenhouse emissions. A big part of leadership is propelling shifts in values, social identities, and behavior that can reverberate across entire communities, market sectors, and sets of nations. Of course, costs and benefits need to be weighed as we debate the best policies to counter global climate change. But action should not pause as we debate; and the notion that I, alone, cannot make a difference is not a good reason to hold back. Each individual, each company, and each nation *can* make a difference.

Read more in Melissa Lane, *Eco-Republic: What the Ancients Can Teach Us about Ethics, Virtue, and Sustainable Living* (Princeton University Press, 2012).