



THE LORD MONCKTON FOUNDATION
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Anthony Watts has urged this be posted widely.

A response to Dr. Paul Bain's use of 'denier' in the scientific literature

Posted on [June 22, 2012](#) by [Anthony Watts](#)



Note: This will be the top post for a day or two, new posts will appear below this one.

Readers may recall my original post, [Nature's ugly decision: 'Deniers' enters the scientific literature.](#) followed by [Dr. Paul Bain Responds to Critics of Use of "Denier" Term](#) (with thanks to [Jo Nova](#), be sure to bookmark and visit her site) Dr. Robert G. Brown of Duke University, commenting as *rgbatduke*, made a response that was commented on by several here in that thread. As commenter REP put it in the update: *It is eloquent, insightful and worthy of consideration.* I would say, it is likely the best response I've ever seen on the use of the "denier" term, not to mention the CAGW issue in general. Thus, I've elevated it a full post. Please share the link to this post widely. – Anthony

Dr. Robert G. Brown writes:

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The tragic thing about the thoughtless use of a stereotype (denier) is that it reveals that you really think of people in terms of its projected meaning. In particular, *even in your response* you seem to equate the term “skeptic” with “denier of AGW”.

This is silly. On WUWT most of the skeptics do not “deny” AGW, certainly not the scientists or professional weather people (I myself am a physicist) and honestly, most of the non-scientist skeptics have learned better than that. What they challenge is the *catastrophic* label and the *alleged magnitude* of the projected warming on a doubling of CO₂. They challenge this on rather solid empirical grounds and with physical arguments and data analysis that is every bit as scientifically valid as that used to support larger estimates, often obtaining numbers that are in better agreement with observation. For this *honest doubt and skepticism that the highly complex global climate models are correct* you have the temerity to socially stigmatize them *in a scientific journal* with a catch-all term that implies that they are as morally reprehensible as those that “deny” that the Nazi Holocaust of genocide against the Jews?

For shame.

Seriously, for shame. You should openly apologize for the use of the term, in Nature, and explain *why it was wrong*. But you won't, will you... although I will try to explain why you should.

By your use of this term, you directly imply that *I* am a “denier”, as I am highly skeptical of Catastrophic Anthropogenic Global Warming (not just “anthropogenic global warming”, which is plausible if not measurable, although there are *honest grounds to doubt even this* associated with the details of the Carbon Cycle that remain unresolved by model or experiment). Since I am a theoretical physicist, I find this enormously offensive. I might as well label you an *idiot* for using it, when you've never met me, have no idea of my competence or the strength of my arguments for or against any aspect of climate dynamics (because on *this* list I argue *both points of view* as the *science demands* and am just as vigorous in smacking down bullshit physics used to challenge some aspect of CAGW as I am to question the physics or statistical analysis or modelling used to “prove” it). But honestly, you probably aren't an idiot (are you?) and no useful purpose is served by *ad hominem* or emotionally loaded *human* descriptors in a rational discussion of an objective scientific question, is there.

Please understand that by creating a catch-all label like this, you quite literally are moving the entire discussion outside of the realm of science, where evidence and arguments are considered and weighed independent of the humans that advance them, where our desire to see one or another result proven are (or should be) irrelevant, where people weigh the *difficulty* of the problem being addressed as an important contributor (in a Bayesian sense) to how much we should believe *any* answer proposed — so far, into the realm where people do *not think at all!* They simply use a *dismissive label* such as “denier” and hence *avoid any direct confrontation with the issues being challenged.*

The issue of difficulty is key. Let me tell you in a few short words why I am a skeptic. First of all, if one examines the *complete* geological record of global temperature variation on planet Earth (as best as we can reconstruct it) not just over the last 200 years but over the last 25 *million* years, over the last *billion* years — one learns that *there is absolutely nothing remarkable about today’s temperatures!* Seriously. Not one human being on the planet would look at that complete record — or even the complete record of temperatures during the Holocene, or the Pliocene — and stab down their finger at the present and go “Oh no!”. Quite the contrary. It isn’t the warmest. It isn’t close to the warmest. It isn’t the warmest in the last 2 or 3 thousand years. It isn’t warming the fastest. It isn’t doing *anything* that can be resolved from the natural *statistical* variation of the data. Indeed, now that Mann’s utterly fallacious hockey stick reconstruction has been re-reconstructed with the LIA and MWP restored, it isn’t even remarkable in the last thousand years!

Furthermore, examination of this record over the last 5 million years reveals a sobering fact. We are in an ice age, where the Earth spends 80 to 90% of its geological time in the grip of vast ice sheets that cover the polar latitudes well down into what is currently the temperate zone. We are at the (probable) *end* of the Holocene, the interglacial in which humans emerged *all the way* from tribal hunter-gatherers to modern civilization. The Earth’s climate is manifestly, empirically bistable, with a warm phase and cold phase, and the cold phase is both more likely and more stable. As a physicist who has extensively studied bistable open systems, this empirical result clearly visible in the data has profound implications. The fact that the LIA was the *coldest point in the entire Holocene* (which has been *systematically cooling* from the Holocene Optimum on) is also worrisome. Decades are irrelevant on the scale of these changes. Centuries are barely relevant. We are nowhere near the warmest, but the coldest century in the last

10,000 years ended a mere 300 years ago, and corresponded almost perfectly with the Maunder minimum in solar activity.

There is *absolutely no evidence* in this historical record of a *third stable warm phase* that might be associated with a “tipping point” and hence “catastrophe” (in the specific mathematical sense of catastrophe, a first order phase transition to a new stable phase). It has been far warmer in the past without tipping into this phase. If anything, we are geologically approaching the point where the Earth is likely to tip the *other* way, into the phase that we *know is there* — the cold phase. A cold phase transition, which the historical record indicates can occur quite rapidly with large secular temperature changes on a decadal time scale, would truly be a catastrophe. Even if “catastrophic” AGW is correct and we *do* warm another 3 C over the next century, if it stabilized the Earth in warm phase and prevented or delayed the Earth’s transition into cold phase *it would be worth it* because the cold phase transition would kill billions of people, quite rapidly, as crops failed throughout the temperate breadbasket of the world.

Now let us try to analyze the modern era *bearing in mind the evidence* of an utterly unremarkable present. To begin with, we need a model that predicts the swings of glaciation and interglacials. Lacking this, we cannot predict the temperature that we *should* have outside for any given baseline concentration of CO₂, nor can we resolve variations in this baseline due to things other than CO₂ from that due to CO₂. We don’t have any such thing. We don’t have anything *close* to this. We cannot predict, or explain after the fact, the huge (by comparison with the present) secular variations in temperature observed over the last 20,000 years, let alone the last 5 million or 25 million or billion. We do not understand the forces that set the baseline “thermostat” for the Earth *before* any modulation due to anthropogenic CO₂, and hence we have no idea if those forces are naturally warming or cooling the Earth *as a trend* that has to be accounted for before assigning the “anthropogenic” component of any warming.

This is a *hard problem*. Not settled science, not well understood, *not* understood. There are theories and models (and as a theorist, I just love to tell stories) but there aren’t any particularly *successful* theories or models and there is a lot of competition between the stories (none of which agree with or predict the empirical data particularly well, at best agreeing with some gross features but not others). One part of the difficulty is that the Earth is a highly multivariate and chaotic driven/open system with complex nonlinear coupling between all of its many drivers, and with anything but a regular surface. If one

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tried to actually write “the” partial differential equation for the global climate system, it would be a set of *coupled* Navier-Stokes equations with unbelievably nasty nonlinear coupling terms — if one can actually include the physics of the water and carbon cycles in the N-S equations at all. It is, quite literally, the most difficult problem in mathematical physics we have ever attempted to solve or understand! Global Climate Models are *children’s toys* in comparison to the actual underlying complexity, especially when (as noted) the *major drivers setting the baseline behavior are not well understood or quantitatively available*.

The truth of this is revealed in the lack of skill in the GCMs. They utterly failed to *predict* the last 13 or 14 years of flat to descending global temperatures, for example, although naturally one can go back and tweak parameters and make them fit it *now*, after the fact. And every year that passes without significant warming *should* be rigorously lowering the climate sensitivity and projected AGW, making the probability of the “C” increasingly remote.

These are all (in my opinion) good reasons to be skeptical of the often egregious claims of CAGW. Another reason is the exact opposite of the reason you used “denier” in your article. The actual scientific question has long since been co-opted by the social and political one. The real reason you used the term is revealed even in your response — we all “should” be doing this and that *whether or not* there is a real risk of “catastrophe”. In particular, we “should” be using less fossil fuel, working to preserve the environment, and so on.

The problem with this “end justifies the means” argument — where the means involved is the abhorrent use of a pejorative descriptor to devalue the *arguers* of alternative points of view rather than their *arguments* at the *political and social* level — is that it is as close to absolute evil in social and public discourse as it is possible to get. I strongly suggest that you read Feynman’s rather famous “Cargo Cult” talk:

<http://www.lhup.edu/~DSIMANEK/cargocul.htm>

In particular, I quote:

For example, I was a little surprised when I was talking to a friend who was going to go on the radio. He does work on cosmology and astronomy,

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and he wondered how he would explain what the applications of this work were. “Well,” I said, “there aren’t any.” He said, “Yes, but then we won’t get support for more research of this kind.” I think that’s kind of dishonest. If you’re representing yourself as a scientist, then you should explain to the layman what you’re doing—and if they don’t want to support you under those circumstances, then that’s their decision.

One example of the principle is this: If you’ve made up your mind to test a theory, or you want to explain some idea, you should always decide to publish it whichever way it comes out. If we only publish results of a certain kind, we can make the argument look good. We must publish both kinds of results.

I say that’s also important in giving certain types of government advice. Supposing a senator asked you for advice about whether drilling a hole should be done in his state; and you decide it would be better in some other state. If you don’t publish such a result, it seems to me you’re not giving scientific advice. You’re being used. If your answer happens to come out in the direction the government or the politicians like, they can use it as an argument in their favor; if it comes out the other way, they don’t publish it at all. That’s not giving scientific advice.

Time for a bit of soul-searching, Dr. Bain. Have you come even *close* to living up to the standards laid out by Richard Feynman? Is this sort of honesty apparent *anywhere* in the global climate debate? Did the “Hockey Team” embrace this sort of honesty in the infamous Climategate emails? Do the IPCC reports *ever* seem to present the *counter* arguments, or do they carefully avoid showing pictures of the 20,000 year thermal record, preferring instead Mann’s hockey stick because it increases the alarmism (and hence political impact of the report)? Does the term “denier” have *any place in any scientific paper ever published* given Feynman’s rather simple criterion for scientific honesty?

And finally, how *dare* you presume to make choices for me, for my relatives, for my friends, for all of the people of the world, but *concealing information from them* so that they make a choice to allocate resources the way *you* think they should be allocated, just like the dishonest astronomer of his example. Yes, the price of honesty might be that people don’t choose to support your work. Tough. It is their money, and their choice!

Sadly, it is all too likely that this is *precisely* what is at stake in climate research. If there is no threat of catastrophe — and as I said, prior to the hockey stick nobody had the slightest bit of luck convincing anyone that the sky was falling because global climate today is geologically unremarkable in every single way except that *we happen to be living in it* instead of analyzing it in a geological record — then there is little incentive to fund the enormous amount of work being done on climate science. There is even less incentive to spend *trillions of dollars of other people's money* (and some of our own) to ameliorate a “threat” that might well be pure moonshine, quite possibly ignoring an even greater threat of movement in the exact opposite direction to the one the IPCC anticipates.

Why am I a skeptic? Because I recognize the true degree of our *ignorance* in addressing this *supremely difficult problem*, while at the same time as a mere citizen I weigh civilization and its benefits against draconian energy austerity on the basis of *no actual evidence* that global climate is in any way behaving unusually on a geological time scale.

For shame.