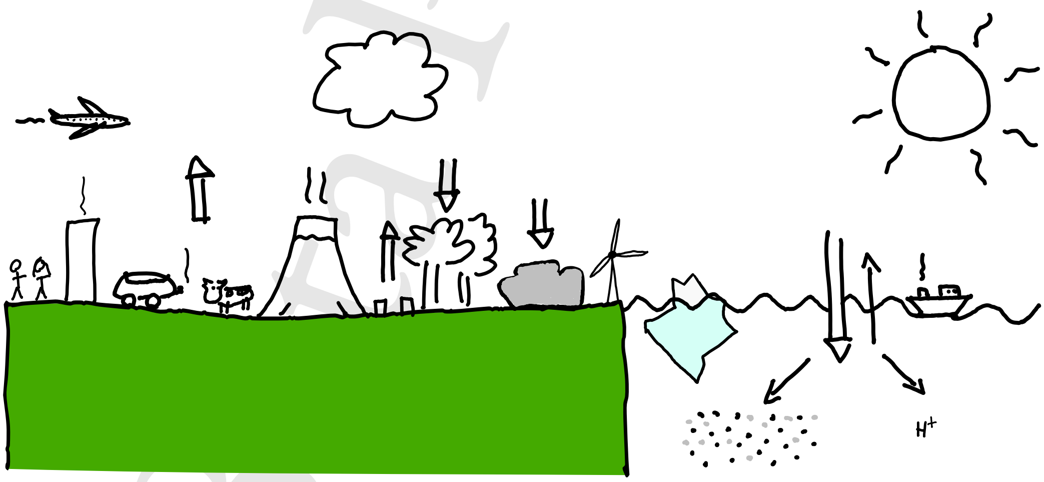
Back-of-the-envelope climate change



Marco Cosentino Lagomarsino

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Beta preprint edition, 2022, not for diffusion.

Illustrations by MCL.

I wish to thank Barbara Vischioni and Pietro Cicuta for useful feedback and copy-editing help.

To Barbara.
Tu sei rimasta una regina,
L'unica che nel male e nel malissimo mi è rimasta vicina.
(Emis Killa)

In memory of Daniele Colombaroli

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Preface

WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT, and who is writing it? I, the author, am not a specialist of climate change. As a matter of fact, while researching for this book I came to realize that I knew quite little about climate change. And to be honest, after having written it I still have many questions. I am a scientist, though, that sort of scientist that uses plots and mathematical models to understand data. My background is in theoretical physics, but the reader should not be mislead by this. The job of a physicist is not only to know and apply a certain set of mathematical laws, but also to extract minimal "phenomenological" and operative descriptions and predictions ("models") from data. The same approach is valuable in many contexts ranging from other scientific disciplines to consulting or planning and logistics, and "data science". Enrico Fermi, the famous Italian-American Nobel-prize physicist, was a master of this art. He could always surprise his peers churning out solutions to difficult problems with a set of simple quick-and-approximate techniques. Fermi also had an extraordinary insight into which problems were important and which ones were not.

I try to apply some of these techniques professionally (in the interdisciplinary area between statistical physics and biology), and over my career I have been striving to imitate Fermi and others in the insightful art of providing simple descriptions of complex problems, which is what makes physics so beautiful in my eyes.

So why this book? Climate science is complex and I just admitted to you my ignorance about it. Many climate scientists are physicists like me, but I did not specialize or work in their area, and I did not acquire the same specific knowledge. On top of this, a full understanding of climate change is an enormous challenge even for the specialized scientists who dedicate their lives to this goal. Climate models, at the basis of our understanding and predictions on climate change, are complex numerical simulations that need a supercomputer to run, and aim to include all our knowledge on the processes that play a role (for example, CO_2 and other greenhouse gas emissions, a spatial description of our planet land, ice, oceans and atmosphere, temperature, etc.) and to formulate predictions on their evolution. These mastodons involve a huge number of parameters that are difficult to control, interpret and communicate even for highly skilled insiders. Consequently, often predictions and scientific responses emerge as alarming prophecies (scrambled and amplified by media) that are difficult to rationalize for many, and put a lot of pressure on people and societies.

We live in the era of data, but this is also a time where data are often used instrumentally to impress and to bend reality in order to support *a priori* positions, and not to interrogate reality. Often even genuinely honest attempts to present data end up overwhelming us, because we lack the proper reference points. On one hand, we'd like to be able to "call bullshit" on this body of political and scientific pressure (and there's a very nice book about this, entitled "Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World", by Carl Bergstrom and Jevin West). On the other hand, if we became very good at this, and we spent our lives calling bullshit on each other, we would not achieve much. There is also a constructive, creative part of interpreting the data, and attempting to build a coherent picture from different sources and measurements. Trying to get a grasp on this positive part is what drove me to attempt writing this book. Often, this constructive part is more difficult than the negative one. This is true in particular regarding greenhouse emissions and climate change, where gigatonnes of greenhouse gases, mass extinctions, impending climate disasters, are thrown at us by big numbers, which we need to connect to our everyday experience of life.

This is not to say that things are not as bad as they seem. They are very bad, as far as I can judge. But the point is that we should be clear-minded about our reactions. My feeling is that there is a huge divide between the narratives about what is happening produced by science, which are difficult to grasp, and typically filtered by the oversimplified translations produced by media, and distorted by politics, and what we, human beings inhabiting this planet, experience every day around us. This divide is a big problem. We need a better intuition on the numbers that are involved, and we need to develop the ability to produce rough common-sense estimates just based on the basic facts, as we do with other aspects of our lives (but typically don't indulge and attempt on matters at this scale). If we could achieve these skills, we would improve our understanding of the changing world around us. This could also enhance our perception of how we should contain the negative changes and how we should adapt.

Hence, this book is an attempt to give some useful tools for reading the data constructively. It is also a chronicle of my own venture into (simple) climate-change data. The questions that I aimed to answer concern the simplest things we can establish about climate change *directly from data* that are available surfing the web. The chapters attempt to present the data gradually, and interpret them by straightforward reasoning, and by using the "Fermi approach" of estimates relying on minimal knowledge (or no knowledge at all) of the physics and chemistry that are relevant to climate science. Breaking each question into smaller sub-questions, and focusing on global trends, I tried to achieve a feeling of the "order of magnitude" of the quantities and processes involved in climate change, and to use this knowledge to draw simple conclusions based on straightforward reasoning. To improve readability, instead of showing data directly through plots, I decided to use hand-drawn and annotated simplifications, where I could highlight what

I thought could be the most important take-home features. A dedicated section at the end of each chapter provides the sources and describes the procedures used on the data.

As it should by now be clear, a big disclaimer for the reader is that this book is not a popular science book on climate change! It is more about data literacy than anything else. It does not aim to be exhaustive, and it does not aim (or claim) to be exact, or even precise. Some of the estimates and considerations you will read could be based on debatable assumptions, simplifications or approximations, or biased by lack of knowledge, and have to be taken as they are: efforts to extract meaning from data, with the main purpose of stimulating informed critical thinking and making climate change data something we can all begin to grasp by ourselves.

SOURCES. The book "Enrico Fermi. The last man who knew everything.", by David Schwartz (Basic Books, 2017) is an interesting biography of the famous physicist. The book "Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World", by Carl Bergstrom and Jevin West, is edited by Penguin Random House, and now at its second edition (2021). The web site `https://www.callingbullshit.org/` describes the initiative, which includes a university course and a set of videos and tools.

Chapter I

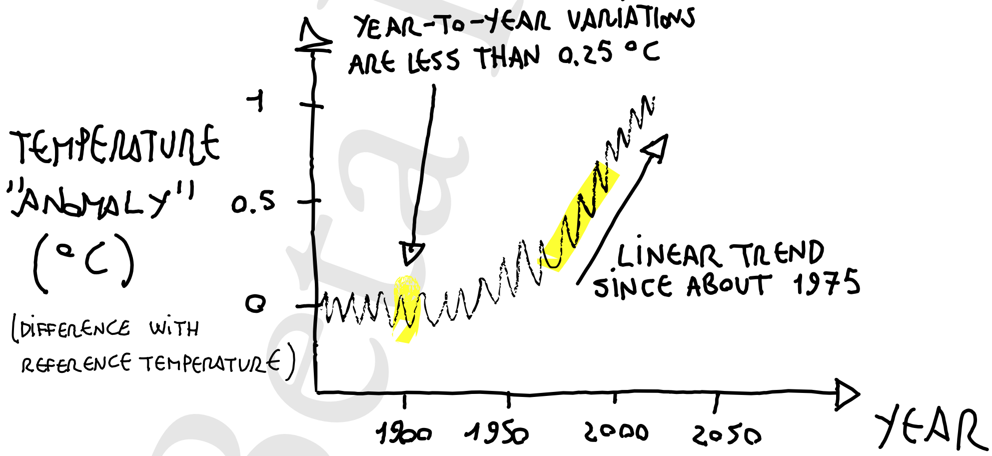
Global temperature is rising

Is global temperature increasing? And how much? If you read newspapers and you are not Donald Trump (and if this book will have any readership, he is certainly not expected to be part of it), you are probably willing to accept that global temperature has been visibly increasing for some decades now. But you are equally likely not to have actually looked at the data, just like me a few years back. And if you were to look at these data, you would have to make sure that this increasing trend is actually meaningful. Admitted that we can establish that there is a trend, a further question is whether this trend is not a fortuitous coincidence, a "fluctuation" as in, "yes, the temperature has been rising for the past 50 years, but it's equally likely to decrease for the next 50". Therefore, at some point, I decided to download the data and look at this record myself, in order to stick my nose directly into these questions.

If we think about temperature, we immediately think of a thermometer. This is the instrument by which we measure temperatures in our daily life, but it was not always available to us. Thermometers were known to the ancient Greeks, but a systematic approach to their calibration was achieved only across the 17th and 18th centuries. Hence, we have a reliable temperature record from measurements with thermometers only starting from the mid 19th century. Starting from the 1950s, the record becomes very precise, thanks to the systematic use of balloons and satellites to record temperature. The period covered by this record gives us very precise and reliable data, but it starts well after the beginning of the industrial revolution. If our goal is to check if temperatures are rising, we can hope that we can see a significant change over this period. We can also explore other tools than thermometers to probe what was happening to temperature before this period, and we should be able to see a change corresponding to when humans started to massively burn coal and other hydrocarbons.

The other problem that we need to face when trying to assess if temperatures are increasing is that temperatures vary a lot. They vary between day and night, from place to place, and they vary across seasons. Many of these variations follow specific trends, mostly due to the illumination from the sun. We all know that July and August are hotter (by many degrees) than December and January in Italy, and vice versa in Brazil; and, quite obviously, we also know that days are warmer than nights. Other changes are more subtle and we might perceive them as random. A detailed understanding of all these oscillations and changes is way beyond our scopes. For us, these changes are a disturbance, as we'd like to capture overall temperature changes beyond any trend with latitude, ocean currents, daily and seasonal oscillations and other fluctuations.

A simple approach is to average temperatures globally, and also average temporally over a year. This process should remove the effect of all the daily and seasonal oscillations, and should "iron out" all the effects that we wish to disregard in order to capture our trend. Hence, I decided to look at these global averages (and climate scientists often do this). This book will only consider global trends, also when we will move to the other quantities that are relevant for climate change. Since I am no climate scientist, I started from processed data - trusting the work that has been performed by expert scientists to derive this information from raw data (and, I guess, trying to cross-check information whenever possible). As you can imagine, performing reliable estimates of these global averages may be a lot of work. For example, the spatial locations of data points may be spread out, and measurements vary over time and location from 1850 to now, and so does the sparsity of the coverage of the planet by measurements and the precision of measured temperatures. However, looking at the data, one way to be confident that these data are trustworthy is that several independent studies, made by different sets of scientists, presumably doing things differently, and using different data, arrive to very similar results for the time series of yearly global temperatures, with discrepancies across studies that are typically much less than one quarter of a degree Celsius for a given year. We can take this discrepancy as an indication of the uncertainty in the data. We would like to use these data to quantify how much global temperature has increased compared to pre-industrial times. Here's my sketch, after looking at these plots, of what the data for global temperature roughly look like in the last almost 200 years[1],



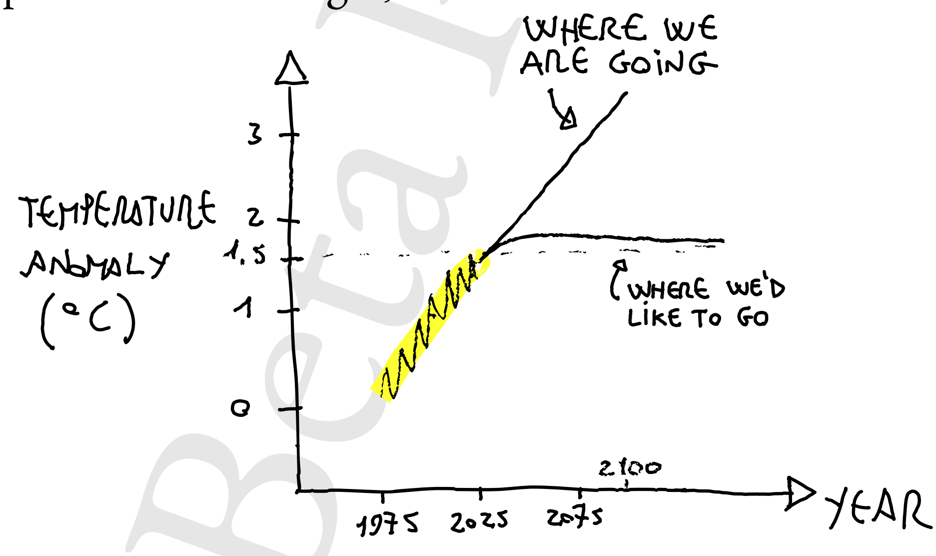
[1]Note that all the sketches in this book are rough representations, meant to convey what I judged as the most important aspects, to show how I would represent the data if I had to draw them on the back of an envelope. Obviously, they likely contain some deviation from the original. You are encouraged to look at the real data to get a more precise idea. There are several reasons why I did not use the real data. First, I wanted to integrate the salient trends from different sources. Second, I wanted to try and simplify the essential information, making it more accessible. Third, real plots look very technical and I did not want to discourage the reader.

The first thing that hits the eye is perhaps that this plot does not report the actual temperatures, but a temperature anomaly, which is a temperature difference. In other words, it subtracts a reference value (here the global average of the data, but sometimes this can be the average over a reference period, such as 1991-2020, or another reference) to obtain what is called the “temperature anomaly”. This expedient is used very often in order to avoid possible offsets due to calibration and ease the comparison of data from different sources and time spans (although it can also be a source of confusion, since if you look at this plot from different sources, you will see different values in the y axis, depending on whether the anomaly has been computed using the average from the period, say, 1991-2020, or 1951-1980, or another period of choice). A related question , since we have seen that the anomaly is a rather arbitrary scale, is that one should define what exactly is meant by “pre-industrial”. By convention, in reports from the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), warming is expressed relative to the global mean temperature of the period 1850-1900, taken an approximation of pre-industrial temperatures. So the figures discussed in the news typically refer to this definition (but as I said the plots may not). I tried to make the plot that I sketched comply to this definition. Today (in 2022), global temperatures have risen by about 1.1^{o}C above the 1850-1900 reference.

Looking more closely at this plot, the second thing one could notice is that, despite of the averaging over all Earth locations and all times over the year, there are interesting "noisy" year-to-year variations. Those are the zigzags in the plot; the ones in my drawing are not the real ones (because they were way too difficult to draw precisely for me), but they represent more or less the real wiggle. What is important - I think - is to look at how big these zigzags are compared to the trend of the plot. Understanding the source of these changes (whose extent is above the uncertainty that we have defined above) is difficult (and beyond our scopes), but as we will see in a minute, these variations can be our "ruler". Looking at the trend beyond these year-to-year variations, the temperature increase seems to be quite sluggish or absent between 1850 and 1900 (so this is a good period against which to define the anomaly), then it picks up increasingly faster over the next 100 years, and finally it becomes really marked after 1975. After that year, the roughly linear increase hits the eye, with a slope of almost 0.5^{o}C change over 25 years, and with a total increase of almost 1^{o}C between 1975 and today. Surely this change is well beyond our uncertainty in the data, which we defined as the discrepancy of estimated global temperatures across different studies, hence we are quite sure that we are not getting this trend because of measurement errors.

But this is not enough. In order to claim that temperature has been changing significantly over this period, we need a meaningful term of comparison for the "natural variation" of our variable, beyond experimental error. For example, we could ask whether the global average yearly temperature has varied more over the years than local temperatures vary from day to day, or, perhaps more fairly, than the global value for, say, the northern hemisphere varies across seasons. Since we are familiar with daily and seasonal temperature variations, we know that the answer to both of these questions would clearly be no, but it is also easy to argue that this comparison is not fair, because these local or faster changes cancel out when we consider global averages. Then how can we conclude that the temperature increase that we see in the past 45 years or so is considerable? One way is to compare them with the year-to-year variations, (the "fluctuations") of the same global average. As we noticed before, these are less than one quarter of a degree, and the trend of the increase we are seeing in the data since 1975 is way above this amount. Hence, just looking at global temperature data we conclude that we cannot dismiss the 1 ^{o}C increase between 1975 and now as an irrelevant or purely coincidental change, based on what we know on temperature variations from the past two-hundred years or so (as I could have guessed, all those newspaper headlines had a meaning!). So the increase in global temperatures is small compared to the temperature changes we experience between day and night, but very big compared to its natural year-to-year variation, which is a better ruler, because it considers that local and fast variations cancel out in our global averages. We'll get a confirmation of this point looking at more ancient (indirectly) recorded temperatures.

Before we do that, let's take a look at what we would predict if we extend this trend to future temperatures. Making meaningful predictions for the future is difficult, but the pressure is much less if we clarify our assumptions. There is a very simple assumption that we can make, which is that things in the near future will continue to behave as they did in the past years (which is a good approximation of the scenario where we will do nothing about climate change)[2]. In this case, since the trend has been increasing as a straight line for the past forty-something years, it seems reasonable to assume that it will keep doing the same. We can then keep drawing the almost straight line we see from 1975 to now, extending the trend to future years. If I assume this "linear extrapolation", the sketch below roughly depicts trend that I get,

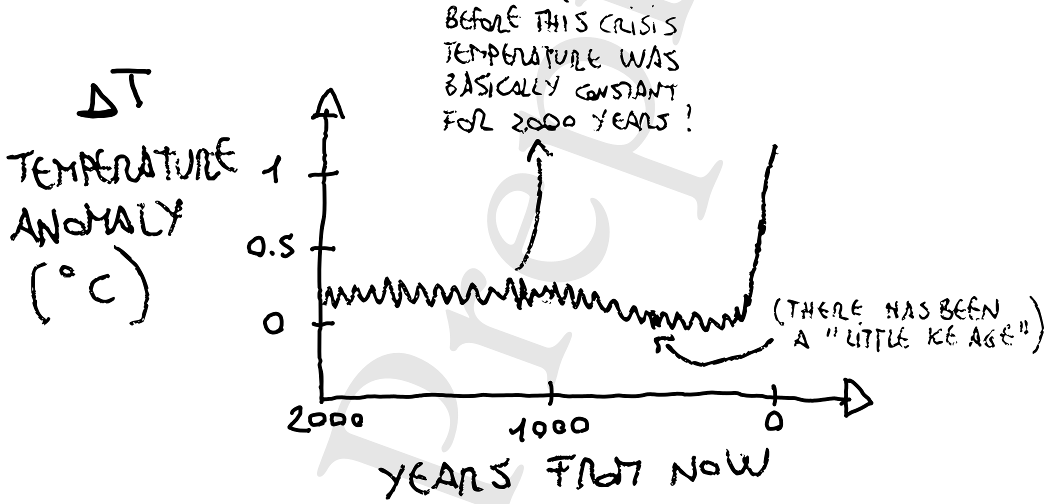


The highlighted part is basically the current trend. To show how radical a change of trend we need, compared to

[2]There are, of course, better approximations, and there are connections between these global averages and extreme events. Please hold on until subsequent chapters for more information on these points.

the current state of things, in order to reach our internationally set climate change targets, I have also drawn an imaginary trend line that reaches this target. Clearly, where we want to go is radically different to where we are currently going. Looking at the literature, it seems that the actual climate models are more pessimistic than my linear extrapolation, as they tend to predict that with no intervention, global temperature would increase even faster (the current estimates say that the peak increase, reached before 2100, could easily be more than 4 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels). But what these models really want to establish is how much we need to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions (see chapter II and III) in order to stay within the targets of 1.5 or 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels that we are trying to set ourselves. We will come back to this problem later, and I'll try to address it with some back-of-the-envelope arguments. Why we set these targets is also something that we would like to understand more directly, as we go through the data. For now we can say that the current consensus among the scientists that study these things is that an increase of 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels could already be dangerous, but given the situation we are in we cannot really hope to do any better.

BEFORE THERMOMETERS WERE INVENTED, temperature changes left a set of different "footprints" that we can measure. These footprints give rise to many possible indirect measurements of temperatures that evaluate diverse sources of information, including the chemical composition of ice cores, the width of tree rings, ocean sediments, fossil pollen and corals. These data give a very instructive perspective on climate change, so at some point I reached the conclusion that I should look myself into these data as well. Here I try to hand-draw global temperature data from the past 2000 years that integrate multiple sources, and that are calibrated with high-precision contemporary measurements.



This plot is very definite in telling us that the temperature changes we are seeing today are exceptional, and other than that global temperature stayed remarkably constant since people like Julius Cesar and Cleopatra strolled around the Mediterranean. What is curious and remarkable is that when the industrial revolution started, and humans began pumping tonnes of CO_2 in the atmosphere by the millions, temperature was actually slightly decreasing. This "Little Ice Age" began in the 14th century and the coldest period ends around 1850 (probably thanks to our intervention). Glaciers were expanding all around the planet, and Londoners would skate on the Thames during Winter. The reasons for this climate change are not known precisely, but probably lay in volcanic eruptions and/or reduced activity of the Sun. The Little Ice Age is another important ruler. Interestingly, we know that it had severe consequences in different areas of the planet. There are records of bad harvests and famines in northern and central Europe, Japan and the Mississippi valley, and of a reduction in North Atlantic cod fishing[3]. Yet, the temperature change observed during the Little Ice Age is quite small compared to what we witnessed in the last 50 years. These considerations, grounded on data, confirmed again my growing opinion that it is a good idea today to pay attention to climate changes.

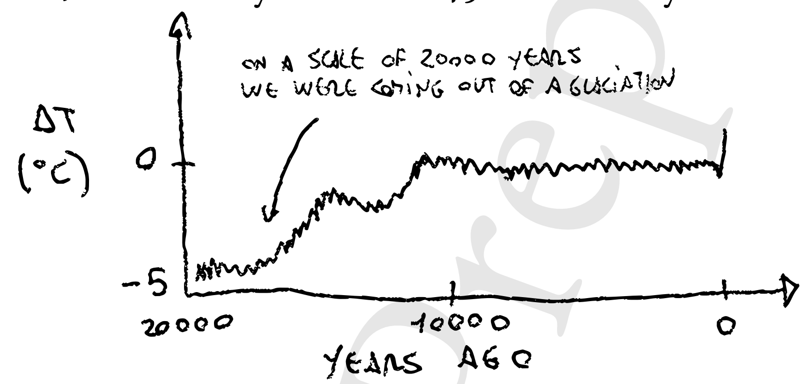
ICE CORES are a precise way to measure temperatures. They are part of the data set I just discussed, but they can go much further back in time, so I drew myself to look at these data and venture into the more distant past of our global temperature. The way scientists can obtain these temperature estimates relies on the quantification of the ratio between heavier and lighter hydrogen and oxygen isotopes that form the water molecules in the ice. An isotope is a version of an atom that is identical in terms of chemical reactions, but has a nucleus with a different weight. Intuitively, the principle behind this measurements is that heavier isotopes precipitate faster and need more energy to evaporate. Hence, the relative amounts of heavier and lighter

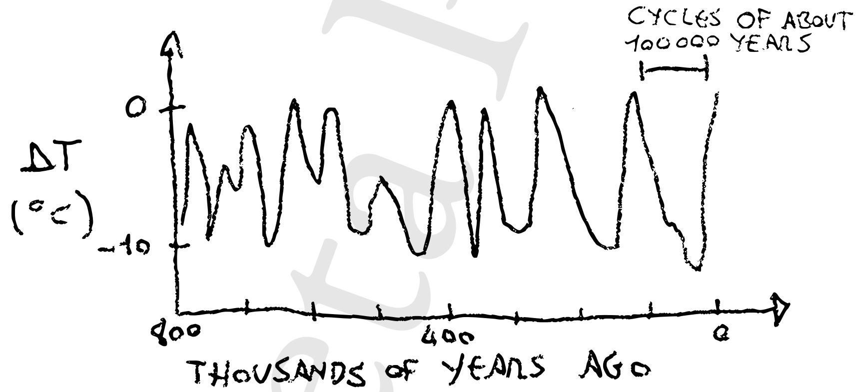
[3]I did not check myself the significance of these findings. Let us take them as "anecdotal evidence" that the global temperature change during the Little Ice Age had an impact. The question, however, may be subject to debate.

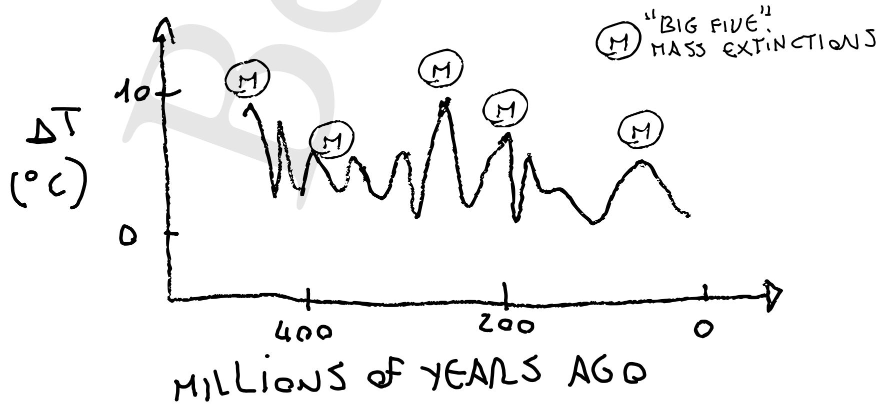
isotopes. This justifies a correlation of isotope ratios with temperature. The question arises of whether this method is precise. As a newbie, I initially thought that this method could be sloppy, but it is not. In order to check, I looked a study where they calibrate the measurement using yearly seasonal temperature variation (the exact 1997 study by van Ommen and Morgan where I found these data is cited at the end of this chapter). This study reports a where in the x axis there is a range of measured temperature (at a given time in the year) and the y axis reports the isotope ratios. The data cluster very tightly on a straight line, meaning that the isotope ratio variation for a given temperature is very small. A 1 percent increase of oxygen isotope ratio corresponds to a change of about 1.8 degrees Celsius. From the plot, the uncertainty appears to be between 1 and 2 degrees. However, the instrumental uncertainty (evaluating the isotope ratio) is very small, and most of the errors are due to relating the ice core layer to a specific period. Hence, measurements could be much more precise on time scales of many years. As I will discuss, ice cores also give us information on the greenhouse gas content of the Earth's atmosphere in the past, just because we can find those gases dissolved in the frozen water.

Amazingly, we can obtain ice core information on temperatures from up to 800.000 years ago. Beyond that date it is still possible to have access to temperatures from geological sources, for example looking at the chemical composition of sediments. These records are obviously less precise in terms of dating, but they can still swiftly measure temperatures back to hundreds of millions of years ago, which is tremendously impressive to me. A big warning is that, as we will see, in general data look different on different time scales, just because the time resolution is different. In practice, we can define the time resolution of a time series (or time scale) as the time interval between two subsequent data points, for example two consecutive layers in an ice core. On some time scale, a time series (for example, temperature versus time) follows some trend or fluctuation, or varies with some periodicity, but all this may cancel out if we go to a larger time scale. For example, if we sample the mean temperature in Europe every month, we see that it oscillates because of seasons, but if we take a time point every January each year, or we average the temperature of all the months each year, we will lose this oscillation. Equally, if every first Tuesday of each month the temperature would halve, but just for one day, we would not see it in the monthly records if we average or we measure on any other day. We can think of a change in time scale as an average, where each time we go to a larger time scale the "fast" changes cancel out because of the averaging, and a clear trend might emerge (but obviously we will have fewer data points). In fact, ice core layers contain averages of isotope levels from snow deposits of many years, and it's very reasonable to think of the measurements as averages, or totals, from all those years. The same will happen if we compare recent data on a scale of one year to old data on scales of thousands to millions of years. At each change of scale, we are looking at averages, and the only truly fair comparisons can be made between data taken at the same time resolution.

WARPING BACK TO THESE DISTANT TIMES, with these warnings in mind, we can discover surprisingly dramatic changes in our planet's temperature. The following sketched plots take us on a breath-taking ride to three different scales of the Earth's past, 20.000 years, 800.000 years and 450 million years.







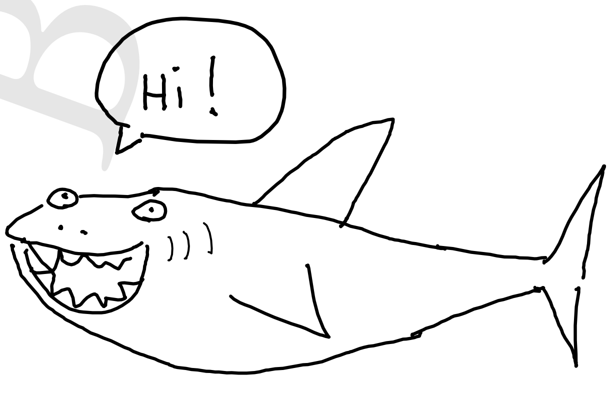
The authors of these plots made efforts to put all temperatures on the same scale. Clearly this task is difficult and the results are subject to uncertainty, but we will take their calibration for good and assume that the temperatures that we see on the different plots are comparable. The first plot shows that before the little ice age and the very recent radical increase connected in the industrial age, temperature has been remarkably stable since about twelve thousands years ago. Remarkably, about twelve thousands years ago is also when we humans began transitioning to farming, after living as hunter gatherers for almost two hundred thousand years. This transition was the key to a set of dramatic changes in our social structure and living standards that made it possible for human populations to start a phase of exponential growth, and eventually build the technological society we have now. When I saw this plot for the first time, I could not help not speculating that such a remarkably stable climate might have played a role in the dramatic turn in human history during this period. A quick Google search showed me that I was not the first person to formulate this hypothesis. Curiously enough, it was another physicist to put forward this idea in 2007, Joan Feynman, sister of the more famous physicist Richard Feynman.

The second plot shows that on a scale of hundreds of thousands of years global temperatures underwent dramatic oscillatory cycles, with changes that reached an amplitude of up to 10^{o}C, toward colder temperatures than today. These cycles (which also change their periodicity going further in the past) were proposed to depend on changes in the Earth's orbit around the Sun, affecting the irradiated heat. They are called Milanković cycles, after the astronomer that first hypothesized their existence in the 1920s. It seems that this hypothesis is still the subject of some debate, but no other major hypotheses have emerged.

Humans (homo sapiens) have been around for two to three hundred thousand years, so, as a species, we have experienced at least two, maybe three cycles of these dramatic climate changes. This proves that we can survive radical climate changes, as a species. But of course we achieved that feat as small sparse population of ape-like hunter gatherers. Sustaining a large, complex and costly technological civilization such as the one we have today through such changes appears to me like a daunting task. What happened to humans in the other "peak" periods when temperatures where reasonably warm? The most recent of these peaks corresponds more or less to the period when we moved out of Africa to migrate to Europe and Asia. Specifically, there is evidence that 120000 to 90000 years ago, when the climate in Africa may have become too hot, humans started to migrate to the Fertile Crescent and Arabia, although the primary human migration is dated around fifty thousand years ago, in a cold and dry period (suggesting that other local factors played a role in the migration).

The other important consideration that we can make looking at this second plot is that the temperatures at which we thrived as a species are hot for the Earth's standards, within this time range spanning hundreds of thousands of years. However, looking at the third plot, which spans millions of years, we get a completely different impression. Today's global climate appears much colder considering the averages on a scale of hundreds of millions of years in the past. Strikingly, five of the temperature peaks correspond to huge mass extinction events known as "the big five", which were first detected from dramatic reductions in the diversity of the fossil record of key sets of species. Dinosaurs lived between the last two mass extinctions, and the widely accepted theory is that the last mass extinction, which wiped them away, was due to an asteroid impact that took place sixty-six million years ago in Yucatan, Mexico. Scientists estimated what happened to temperature "shortly" after this event by looking at oxygen isotope composition of fish debris. Clearly, for times so far away in the past, the time resolution that can be achieved is limited, but what they found is quite interesting. After a short artificial winter caused by dust blocking sunlight, it seems that temperatures quickly rose by about 5^oC, and this situation lasted for about a hundred thousand years. This is believed to have occurred due to increased CO_2 emissions because the asteroid hit rocks that are rich in carbon, directly releasing it in the atmosphere, as well as triggering vast wildfires. This situation of fast CO_2 increase and fast temperature increase is probably the closest "natural experiment" that we can use as a term of comparison to the situation of the last two hundred years, where CO_2 emissions and temperatures are rising very rapidly. In most other occasions in the historical record these changes occurred very slowly. The following two chapters will deal with CO_2 emissions and their link with temperature changes.

Going back to the wider picture of million-year temperature changes, the visible correlation between temperature peaks and extinction events (which does not only involve the big five mass extinctions, but also smaller detectable mass extinction events) at these time scales triggers in many the idea that global warming is not good for biodiversity, which we will discuss a bit more later on. Curiously, sharks survived all five of these mass extinctions events. This diverse and adaptable species can live from deep oceans to shallow seas and even rivers, and they eat a wide variety of food, from plankton to fish, to mammals like seals. Consequently (if that is of any comfort), we can expect that sharks as a group are likely to survive future oceans changes, including the ones that are triggered by humans. Unfortunately, all this Darwinian fitness did not make sharks a more intelligent or sympathetic species (at least from our standpoint). Sharks remain relatively not fun to hang out with.



SOURCES. The global average temperature datasets 1850-2020 from NASA, NOAA, Berkeley Earth, and meteorological offices of the U.K. and Japan, as well as the temperature record of the last 2,000 years, which comes from the PAGES 2k consortium (Nat. Geosci. 12, 643-649, 2019) were downloaded from Wikipedia at the page "Global temperature record" (link). Information on climate models can be found on the article by Jeff Tollefson on Nature 580, 443-445 (2020) The 800 ky Ice core data was downloaded from the NOAA database (`https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov`). It is the EPICA Dome C Ice Core 800 kYr Deuterium Data and Temperature Estimates, and the original publication is Jouzel and coworkers, Science, 317, 5839, 793-797 (2007). The calibration plot for the isotope ratio discussed in the text comes from Figure 3 in the study van Ommen and Morgan, J. Geophys. Res., 102(D8), 9351âĂŞ 9357 (1997). The million-year time scale ice core plot is hand drawn from Song and coworkers Nat Commun 12, 4694 (2021). The hypothesis on a role of climate stability for the development of agricultural societies originally comes from J. Feynman and A. Ruzmaikin, Climatic Change 84, 295-311 (2007). The climate context of the out-of-Africa human migration is investigated by Jessica Tierney and coworkers Geology 45 (11): 1023-1026 (2017). The information on the consequences of the Yucatan meteorite impact comes from MacLeod and coworkers, Science 360 (6396) 1467-1469 (2018), and the cover article by Cristophe Lécuyer on the same issue.