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CO₂, the greenhouse effect and global warming: from the pioneering work of Arrhenius and Callendar to today’s Earth System Models

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Climate warming during the course of the twenty-first century is projected to be between 1.0 and 3.7 °C depending on future greenhouse gas emissions, based on the ensemble-mean results of state-of-the-art Earth System Models (ESMs). Just how reliable are these projections, given the complexity of the climate system? The early history of climate research provides insight into the understanding and science needed to answer this question. We examine the mathematical quantifications of planetary energy budget developed by Svante Arrhenius (1859–1927) and Guy Stewart Callendar (1898–1964) and construct an empirical approximation of the latter, which we show to be successful at retrospectively predicting global warming over the course of the twentieth century. This approximation is then used to calculate warming in response to increasing atmospheric greenhouse gases during the twenty-first century, projecting a temperature increase at the lower bound of results generated by an ensemble of ESMs (as presented in the latest assessment by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). This result can be interpreted as follows. The climate system is conceptually complex but has at its heart the physical laws of radiative transfer. This basic, or “core” physics is relatively straightforward to compute mathematically, as exemplified by Callendar’s calculations, leading to quantitatively robust projections of baseline warming. The ESMs include not only the physical core but also climate feedbacks that introduce uncertainty into the projections in terms of magnitude, but not sign: positive (amplification of warming). As such, the projections of end-of-century global warming by ESMs are fundamentally trustworthy: quantitatively robust baseline warming based on the well-understood physics of radiative transfer, with extra warming due to climate feedbacks. These projections thus provide a compelling case that global climate will continue to undergo significant warming in response to ongoing emissions of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases to the atmosphere.

Introduction
Climate change is a major risk facing mankind. At the United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Paris at the end of last year, 195 countries agreed on a plan to reduce emissions of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases, aiming to limit global temperature increase to well below 2 °C (relative to pre-industrial climate, meaning a future warming of less than 1.4 °C because temperature had already increased by 0.6 °C by the end of the twentieth century). The link between CO₂ and climate warming has caught the attention of scientists and politicians, as well as the general public, via the well-known “greenhouse effect” (Figure 1). Solar radiation passes largely unhindered through the atmosphere, heating the Earth’s surface. In turn, energy is re-emitted as infrared, much of which is absorbed by CO₂ and water vapour in the atmosphere, which thus acts as a blanket surrounding the Earth. Without this natural greenhouse effect, the average surface temperature would plummet to about −21 °C,\textsuperscript{1} rather less pleasant than the 14 °C experienced today.

The concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere is increasing year on year as we burn fossil fuels, which enhances the natural greenhouse effect and warms the planet. To what extent, then, must CO₂ emissions be kept under control in order to restrict global temperature rise to within 2 °C? The projections of complex Earth System Models (ESMs) provide quantitative answers to this question. Run on supercomputers, these models integrate the many processes taking place in the atmosphere, on land and in the ocean. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

In some instances, there has been direct criticism of the trustworthiness of the ESMs within the peer-reviewed literature. Gregor Betz, for example, remarks that “it’s not even clear that discrete simulations yield individually plausible or relevant projections.”

In this article, we delve into the history of climate science, notably the early “pen-and-paper” models of planetary energy budget by Svante Arrhenius (1859–1927) and Guy Stewart Callendar (1898–1964). Arrhenius was primarily interested in the causes of the ice ages, whereas Callendar is remembered for his work linking warming to human-made burning of fossil fuels, the so-called “Callendar Effect.” Both models illustrate the role of the “greenhouse” physics of radiative transfer (the passage and attenuation of radiation in the atmosphere by absorption and scattering) in global warming, in the absence of feedbacks (with the exception of water vapour). We construct an empirical approximation of Callendar’s model and show that it successfully generates a retrospective forecast of warming during the twentieth century. The same model is then used to make projections of warming to the end of the current century and compared with equivalent simulations made by today’s ESMs (which include a range of system feedbacks), as presented in the latest IPCC assessment report. Based on this comparison, we will conclude by presenting the case for the trustworthiness of ESMs as regards their projection of global warming during the twenty-first century.

**Arrhenius: CO₂ and the ice ages**

During the eighteenth century, early geologists noticed that giant boulders, today known as “erratics,” were scattered across much of Europe, far beyond the Alpine mountains from which they originated. How did they get there? Noah’s flood was one obvious suggestion. Or maybe they were the result of cataclysmic volcanic activity. The actual cause turned out to be as remarkable as it was profound. Jean de Charpentier, a mining engineer, travelled to the Rhône Valley in the 1830s and suggested that the huge blocks of granite he saw there had been transported from afar by glaciers. Soon afterwards, Louis Agassiz, the famous Swiss-born naturalist and geologist, proposed that great ice ages had gripped the Earth during the previous millions of years of its history. Deep valleys were carved into the landscape as large parts of Europe, North America, and South America were covered by expanding ice sheets and glaciers, carrying with them the mysterious boulders. Woolly mammoths, mastodons, and other wild animals roamed the surrounding areas, experiencing temperatures some five degrees colder than today.

What, then, was the cause of changes in the temperature of the Earth sufficient to drive the ice ages? Even today, we

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8 We use the word “model” to describe any set of equations used to estimate climate, ranging from simple to very complex.


10 IPCC, Climate Change 2013 (ref. 2).

11 Louis Agassiz, Études sur les glaciers (Neuchatel: Dent et Gassmann, 1840).

do not have a full answer to this question, which lies in understanding the radiative balance of the Earth. One part of the story is deviations in the Earth’s orbit, the so-called Milanković cycles.11 Another key factor is the composition of the atmosphere, giving rise to the proverbial ‘greenhouse.’ The basic concepts of planetary energy budget and the greenhouse effect were first put forward in the early nineteenth century by the French scientist Joseph Fourier,12 although he never mentioned greenhouses in his writing.13 Fourier recognised that the atmosphere is opaque to “dark heat” (infrared radiation), but he was unable to identify which components were responsible. A few decades later, John Tyndall, an Irish physicist working in London, discovered that infrared absorption is largely due to carbon dioxide and water vapour, based on a series of carefully designed laboratory experiments.14 Could it be, Tyndall thought, that variations in the atmospheric concentrations of CO2 and water vapour account for “all the mutations of climate which the researches of geologists reveal”?15 What was needed was quantitative proof, converting the results of the experimental work into mathematical equations.

The Swede Svante Arrhenius (Figure 2) is remembered for his work on the conductivities of electrolytes, a topic of research that would earn him the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1903. Arrhenius was interested not only in chemistry, but in physics and mathematics also, and it was this combination of talents that led him to perhaps his greatest achievement: the construction of a quantitative mathematical analysis of the influence of CO2 on planetary energy budget, culminating in the publication of his famous paper, “On the influence of carbonic acid [CO2] in the air upon the temperature of the ground.”16 Arrhenius had accepted a lectureship in physics at the Högskola, Stockholm in 1891 and was appointed professor of physics four years later. He was also a founder member of the Stockholm Physics Society, which became a milieu of intellectual activity during their fortnightly meetings as scientists from far and wide debated a range of topics classed under the heading “cosmic physics”: physics, chemistry, meteorology, geology, astronomy, and astrophysics.17 The ice ages, and causes thereof, were inevitably a lively subject for discussion. Through these meetings, Arrhenius formed a close collaboration with his colleague, Arvid Hög bom, a geologist who was interested in the geochemical carbon cycle of the Earth and in particular how atmospheric carbon dioxide is buffered by the ocean, vegetation on land, and the formation of carbonates and silicates by weathering (breakdown of rocks and minerals via contact with the environment).18 “An increase or decrease of the supply [of CO2] continued during geological periods,” Hög b om remarked, “must conduce to remarkable alterations of the quantity of carbonic acid in the air.”19

The stage was set, and Arrhenius forged ahead with developing equations to quantify how widely atmospheric CO2 would have to vary in order to bring about changes to both colder and warmer climates sufficient to explain the ice ages. The calculations involved balancing the radiative heat budget (thereby assuming a state of equilibrium), namely solar radiation arriving at the Earth’s surface (including the effect of albedo from clouds and the Earth’s surface) and the subsequent absorption of re-emitted infrared radiation by the atmosphere. Calculating this absorption required integration across the different wavelengths that encompass the absorption spectrum of CO2 and water vapour, as well as integrating across different zenith angles (the distance from vertical at which sunlight strikes the atmosphere) and the corresponding path lengths associated with incoming and outgoing radiation. Atmospheric absorption by water vapour occurs at many wavelengths whereas absorption by CO2 takes place in three main bands at 2.7, 4.3, and 15 μm (Figure 3). Arrhenius used measurements made by the American physicist Samuel P. Langley in the late 1880s to parameterise absorption, superseding those of Tyndall


18 Svante Arrhenius, “On the influence” (ref. 16).
had successfully presented the case for variations in atmospheric CO$_2$ as a cause of the ice ages.

What, then, of future warming? Arrhenius had, after all, investigated the effects of both decreasing and increasing CO$_2$ on radiative balance. As yet, however, neither he nor his contemporaries had any inkling of the potential detrimental effects of CO$_2$ on climate. Lecturing at the Hogskola in 1896, Arrhenius remarked that a doubling of CO$_2$ would occur three-thousand years hence, based on the rate of burning fossil fuel at the time. This would permit, he surmised, "our descendants . . . to live under a warmer sky and in a less harsh environment than we were granted." In similar fashion, the Swedish meteorologist Nils Ekholm remarked that if "the present burning of pit-coal continues for some thousand years, it will undoubtedly cause a very obvious rise in the mean temperature of the earth. Also Man will no doubt be able to increase the supply of carbonic acid by digging of deep fountains pouring out carbonic acid . . . [as well as] by protecting the weathering layers of silicates from the influence of the air and by ruling the growth of plants according to his wants and purposes. Thus it seems possible that Man will be able efficaciously to regulate the future climate of the earth and consequently prevent the arrival of a new Ice Age." 

**Callendar: CO$_2$ and twentieth-century warming**

The rise of industrialisation was in reality much faster than Arrhenius and Ekholm expected. Society became urbanised and manufacturing continued apace in the early twentieth century as railroads ferried raw materials such as iron and steel to factories where machines now did much of the work. International trade was expanding, fuelled by a growing demand for consumer goods, including new inventions such as the telephone and gasoline powered automobiles. The CO$_2$ story was, however, largely forgotten until Guy Stewart Callendar (Figure 4) emerged on the scene in the 1930s. Callendar was by profession a steam engineer and inventor, second son of Hugh Longbourne Callendar, distinguished professor of physics at Imperial College London. The younger Callendar also took a keen interest in meteorology and, despite ranking as an amateur, was more than a match for his professional counterparts.

Callendar, with his expertise in physics, was fully acquainted with Arrhenius’s calculations linking global temperature change to atmospheric CO$_2$. Calculations based on theory were all very well, but Callendar wanted proof. Was it possible to show a link between warming and CO$_2$ from measurements made during the previous decades? With his interest in meteorology, Callendar set about compiling the necessary data. He extracted monthly average temperature records from the World Weather Records, a hefty series of volumes published by the Smithsonian Institution. After adjusting for the non-uniform geographical distribution of data, he could estimate global
In order to formally establish the physical link between warming and CO₂, Callendar sought to apply his expertise in physics to calculate the Earth's heat balance from first principles. He set about constructing a set of equations that was similar to that of Arrhenius, again based on an equilibrium state, but with improvements. He used the infrared absorption spectrum for CO₂ of Rubens and Aschkinass, rather than Langley's measurements. Unlike Arrhenius, Callendar's model divided the atmosphere into layers, thus representing its vertical structure with respect to temperature, water vapour, and CO₂ content. The water vapour feedback was again the only one represented. Like Arrhenius, Callendar undertook calculations for different levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere, from which he distilled the results in to a single graph (Figure 5a). Based on the results, Callendar suggested that about half of the warming from 1880–1935 was due to changes in CO₂. Moreover, he calculated temperature increase to the end of the twentieth century, although the resulting figure of 0.16°C was considerably too low given that the actual warming was about 0.6°C. The cause of the discrepancy was not, however, because of fundamental deficiencies in Callendar's equations. Rather, he had used estimates of atmospheric CO₂ increase that were much too conservative. Furthermore, he considered only CO₂ and water vapour when calculating radiative transfer, whereas the role of several other greenhouse gases, including methane, nitrous oxide, and chlorofluorocarbons, is now well known. Aerosols (particulates) released during the burning of fossil fuels are also important because they cause cooling by direct reflection of sunlight and by modification of the optical properties of clouds.

What, then, would Callendar have projected for global temperature rise during the twentieth century if he had correctly anticipated the increase in atmospheric CO₂, as well as taking into consideration the other greenhouse gases and aerosols? It is possible to undertake this calculation retrospectively using the results of Callendar's equations, as presented in Fig. 5a. In order to do so, we derived an empirical fit to the model (Stephen McIntyre carried out a similar fitting exercise, presented on his Climate Audit website). In order to make projections for warming in both the twentieth-century (this section) and the end of the twenty-first century (next section), we fitted a single exponential for the range 220 ≤ pCO₂ ≤ 600 ppm (encompassing all pCO₂ greater than the preindustrial value of 280 ppm; pCO₂ is the partial pressure of CO₂ in air):

\[ \Delta T = 2.28 \ln(p\text{CO}_2/100) - 2.50, \]

where \( \Delta T \) is change in surface temperature of the Earth in °C and atmospheric pCO₂ is in parts per million.

31 Callendar, “Artificial Production” (ref. 29).
35 Callendar, “Artificial Production” (ref. 29).
39 A single exponential could not be successfully fitted throughout the entire range shown in figure 5a.
The effect of the combined suite of greenhouse gases and aerosols on radiative heat balance can be quantified in terms of CO₂ equivalent, a metric which scales to common warming potential.⁴⁰ We imposed this metric (Figure 5b), rather than pCO₂ (pCO₂ equivalent is less than pCO₂ because of aerosols). The resulting projected temperature increase during the twentieth century, using the empirical approximation to Callendar’s model (Eq. (1)), is shown in Fig. 5c. Note that the effect of natural changes in heating due to solar output and volcanic activity is not represented. Solar activity increased slightly during the mid-twentieth century,⁴¹ promoting heating, whereas the introduction of aerosols (particulates) into the stratosphere by volcanoes caused cooling.⁴² With these caveats in mind, the projected overall increase in heating is 0.52 °C which is somewhat on the low side compared to the observed rise of 0.6 °C (Fig. 5c), a consequence of Callendar’s model (and our empirical approximation of it) not taking account of...

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Footnotes:


climate feedbacks (other than water vapour) that amplify warming (see next section). Nevertheless, we conclude that Callendar’s model, in conjunction with realistic forcing, performs remarkably well when used to project climate warming during the twentieth century.

Like Arrhenius, Callendar did not foresee the potential detrimental impacts of climate warming. Rather, he emphasised the societal benefits that might accrue from increasing temperature: crop production would be enhanced, especially at northerly latitudes, and the return of another deadly ice age would be delayed indefinitely.43 Indeed, as late as the mid-1950s, the famous cartoonist Virgil Partch was gaily illustrating the coming “revolution in weather” and “boom in the north” (Figure 6).

A source of uncertainty with Callendar’s calculations had been the role of the ocean, which, as a reservoir, contains fifty times more carbon than that of the atmosphere. It could be argued that CO$_2$ of industrial origin would not remain in the atmosphere for long but would instead be absorbed and sequestered in this vast storage pool. The idea was refuted by Roger Revelle, an American oceanographer and climate scientist, who demonstrated that, due to the chemical nature of carbon in seawater, the ocean is buffered and can only absorb gases from the atmosphere rather slowly.44 The debate surrounding the dangers of climate warming due to the “invisible pollutant”45 was hotting up. “Human beings,” remarked Revelle, “are now carrying out a large scale geophysical experiment [combustion of fossil fuels] that could not have happened in the past nor be reproduced in future.”46 The International Geophysical Year (IGY) arrived in 1956 and Revelle was joined at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography (San Diego, California) by Charles David Keeling, who was to lead an IGY programme on atmospheric CO$_2$. Keeling thus started the now iconic series of measurements at the Mauna Loa volcano in Hawaii, which have shown the progressive year-on-year increase of CO$_2$ in the atmosphere.47 The dangers of climate change became headline news, with

43 Callendar, “Artificial Production” (ref. 29).

46 Revelle and Suess, “Carbon Dioxide Exchange” (ref. 44).
Keeling himself pondering the potential significance ‘of returning half a billion years’ accumulation of carbon to the air.’

The future: can we trust Earth System Models?
The advent of digital computers had, by the 1960s, allowed routine weather forecasting, which led in turn to the development of general circulation models for climate simulations. Today, projections of climate warming are made using Earth System Models, which in themselves constitute major research programmes. Run on supercomputers, the code alone reaches hundreds of thousands of lines. (It is worth noting that similar code describing the atmosphere is used in weather forecasting models, which are successfully tested every day, thereby providing extra credibility for some of the parameterisations involved.) The need for all this computing muscle is unsurprising given that the Earth system is outwardly complex, involving a myriad of processes and interactions between land, oceans, and the atmosphere (Figure 7). ESMs divide the global domain into a matrix of grid cells, within which the three-dimensional fluxes of heat, water, and carbon are simulated. Regional interactions and their impact on the global system are thereby represented. Climate feedbacks are centre stage including changes in atmospheric and ocean circulation, melting of snow and ice, fertilisation of vegetation by CO₂, changes to clouds and water vapour.

In the last section, we showed that Callendar’s equations, with no representation of feedbacks with the exception of water vapor, could potentially explain most of the warming observed during the twentieth century. This poses the obvious question: do we actually need the ESMs? This is a somewhat hypothetical question, as there is the obvious rejoinder that we need more than just projections of global average climate. The spatial grid of ESMs provides geographical detail of future changes, essential information for developing adaptation and mitigation strategies at regional scales. Nevertheless, with respect to the global domain, one can still ask whether it is necessary to include all the extra complexity, including feedbacks, in models in order to make projections of climate warming. And if the extra complexity is necessary, to what

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extent does it introduce uncertainty into the projected outcomes? In order to answer these questions, we examine the projections of climate warming during the twenty-first century generated by a suite of ESMs as published in the latest IPCC assessment report.\textsuperscript{50} Results are presented for two contrasting Representative Concentration Pathway (RCP) scenarios,\textsuperscript{51} RCPs 2.6 and 8.5, which specify future emissions of greenhouse gases and aerosols. The former is a strong mitigation scenario involving major replacement of fossil fuel use with renewable energies and nuclear power, as well as the implementation of new technologies for carbon capture and storage.\textsuperscript{52} In contrast, RCP 8.5 is a high emission scenario that assumes rapid population growth, along with modest improvements in the efficiency of energy usage, and so ongoing high demand for energy from fossil fuels,\textsuperscript{53} atmospheric CO$_2$ more than doubles from its present day value of just over 400–936 ppm by the year 2100.

The projected increase in global surface temperature during the course of the twenty-first century by the ESMs is 1.0 and 3.7 °C for RCPs 2.6 and 8.5 respectively, based on the ensemble means of the simulations (Figure 8). There is, however, considerable spread across the ESMs for each scenario; 95% confidence intervals are 0.3–1.7 °C for RCP 2.6 and 2.6–4.8 °C for RCP 8.5.\textsuperscript{54} This range indicates uncertainty in the results that can be understood, we propose, by separating warming into two components: baseline warming due to the physics of radiative transfer (the "greenhouse effect") and additional warming due to climate feedbacks. The baseline component of total warming, as projected by the ESMs, can be quantified by analogy using Callendar's model assuming that both share essentially the same equations for the core physics of radiative transfer (and noting the Callendar's model contains one feedback, water vapour, which is therefore considered part of the baseline). We therefore used Eq. (1) (the empirical approximation of Callendar's model) to project future baseline warming, again forced with CO$_2$ equivalent. The resulting end-of-century warming is 0.4 and 2.8 °C for RCPs 2.6 and 8.5 respectively (Figure 8), on the lower bound of the total warming projected by the ESMs, which includes not only the baseline, but also extra warming due to feedbacks. These projections of baseline warming are, we argue, quantitatively robust (i.e., trustworthy) because the core physics of radiative transfer is conceptually simple with no major uncertainties and can be relatively straightforwardly described in mathematics. There is one caveat: the Earth system is currently not in a state of radiative equilibrium, which is contrary to the equilibrium assumption of Callendar's model. This disequilibrium is principally due to the timescale of climate feedbacks, but also occurs because the ocean is a vast store of heat. As heat from the atmosphere penetrates surface waters, some causes direct warming on timescales up to about fifteen years, whereas some is mixed into the deep ocean and will only return to the surface and thereby reach thermal equilibrium with the atmosphere on timescales of centuries or more. The deep ocean thus heats up relatively slowly and the use of Callendar's model will therefore overestimate the baseline warming generated by the ESMs on timescales of several decades. The error associated with thermal inertia would appear, however, to be relatively small, e.g. up to 0.4 °C by the end of the twenty-first century (for RCP 8.5 and much less for RCP 2.6).\textsuperscript{55}

Over and above the baseline, additional warming is projected by the ESMs due to climate feedbacks. Thus, the extra complexity of the climate system does matter. We do need the ESMs. Unlike the quantitatively robust core physics, however, there is considerable uncertainty in the magnitude of climate feedbacks, which is manifest as the spread of projections within the model ensemble. Nevertheless, although uncertain in magnitude, the sign of the temperature response is known: positive. Based on decades of high quality research, the evidence firmly points to amplification of warming by climate feedbacks. The potential for the atmosphere to hold water vapor increases with warming, melting of snow and ice lowers albedo, CO$_2$ uptake by plants is diminished as other factors limit growth, and production by plankton decreases as a warming ocean supplies less nutrients to surface waters.\textsuperscript{56}
are uncertainties, of which the largest may be associated with clouds and how they change in future. The case for the overall impact of feedbacks being positive (i.e., amplification of warming) is nevertheless overwhelming. Some feedbacks operate over long timescales, such as the melting of ice sheets and glaciers and changes in vegetation, and so, as with the thermal inertia of the ocean, mean that the system is not in equilibrium. This does not, however, compromise our analysis of the uncertainties in the projections of climate warming by ESMs because the models directly incorporate the full time dependency of the processes involved.

We conclude that the projections of end-of-century global warming by ESMs are essentially trustworthy: quantitatively robust baseline warming driven by the core physics of radiative transfer, with extra warming due to climate feedbacks. Any notion that the climate system is too complex for meaningful analysis, or that the climate warming projections of ESMs are not plausible or relevant, can be discounted. The projections of ESMs provide a compelling case that global climate will continue to undergo significant warming in response to ongoing emissions of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. Arrhenius and Callendar demonstrated admirably that core physics can explain much of the observed variation in global surface temperature as a consequence of changes in atmospheric CO₂. With their work providing the foundation, we have shown that the conceptual separation of the processes associated with the radiative core of the greenhouse and climate feedbacks is the key to understanding the overall uncertainty, and associated trustworthiness, of climate models. In closing, we should reiterate that warming at global scale is by no means the sole focus of climate research. Regional climate matters also, necessitating the use of the ESMs, which provide the required geographical resolution, representation of mountains, oceans and land-types, and other information. Projections at regional scale focus not only on warming, but also on the incidence of extreme events such as floods, droughts, and hurricanes. A discussion of the merits of ESMs in making projections of regional climate is beyond the scope of this article; suffice to say that providing robust simulations of the global trend in warming is an excellent starting point.

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58 IPCC, *Climate Change 2013* (ref. 2).