

I’ve spent a lot of time and energy talking about the need to adapt to climate change, but I’ve also become increasingly uneasy about “adaptation” as a way to think about the situation. One of the things I don’t like about the term “adaptation” is that it suggests that we actually can, at some expense, restore ourselves to the same position we would have been in without climate change. For any given amount of climate change, we can do things that decrease the resulting harms (at a cost), but we can’t eliminate those harms. Adapting to climate change is like “adapting” to a serious chronic disease — you can get by, with luck, but it’s still not like being healthy.

But there’s also an important conceptual issue. The idea of adaptation assumes that the world will go along more or less as it always has, except that we’ll take some specific actions due to climate change to neutralize its effects. This makes sense if we think global warming is just a marginal change. But given our current trajectory, climate change, adaptation, and mitigation may go beyond marginal impacts. Climate change may well have wide societal effects, and mitigation efforts themselves could be major enough to shift the economy. Moreover, both mitigation efforts and actions to address climate-based risks will have environmental impacts of their own. “Adaptation” suggests a marginal quality to climate change that may be quite misleading.

As a comparison, suppose we were to ask which policy decisions in L.A. were adaptive responses to the existence of automobiles. It would really be a kind of meaningless question in the sense that *everything* about L.A. has been shaped by automobiles, and everything people do is tied up, one way or another, with the city that cars have created. Asking which current L.A. policies are “adaptations” to the automobile is almost a meaningless question.

I hope we can keep climate change down to a level that limits impacts on society to easily identified marginal changes — but that’s far from being a sure thing. In the worlds of 2060 or 2100, where people live, what they do for a living, the rate of economic growth, even the alignment of political interest groups, could be shaped by a different climate, by an economy with a different energy base, and a built environment that has changed due to climate risks. In such a world, it makes little sense to talk about adaptation costs, because the baseline of a world free from climate change has become irrelevant.