

The normative significance of the imposition of risks of rights violations in the context of climate change

(Main supervisor: Lukas H. Meyer)

Emission-generating activities by currently living people are often beneficial to themselves, but simultaneously impose a risk of a set-back of basic interests of future people, e.g. the interests of the latter in survival, health, a decent level of well-being, being able to lead an autonomous life. The project assumes that such basic interests of people (both currently living and future) are protected by universal claim rights with general correlative duties, and future people have such rights vis-à-vis currently living people. According to a rights-based interpretation of (strong) sufficientarianism, these interests ought to be given high or absolute priority as a matter of justice, which seems to imply that future people have an overriding claim against currently living people that they do not impose risks of the violation of such rights on them.

The project aims at first developing and justifying a plausible understanding of the harm or wrong involved in imposing risks on future people and then uses this understanding to investigate the plausibility of the no-risk principle: On the one hand, it seems reasonable to hold that imposing risks at least in some cases involves harming or wronging future people and, further, that in some cases it will be clearly impermissible or at least culpable or blameworthy to impose those risks. On the other, responding to climate change seems to be a case where the imposition of some risks, and in particular risks of serious setbacks of interests, on currently living and future people is non-avoidable. Consequently, the working hypothesis to be investigated is that, at least when it comes to climate change, the no-risk principle is only prima facie valid.

[The project contributes to answering the DK research question 2](#)

Sufficientarian weighing of the imposition of risks of rights violations and other set-backs of interests in the context of climate change

(Main supervisor: Lukas H. Meyer)

Assuming that the principle that future people have an overriding claim against currently living people that they do not impose risks of the violation of basic rights on them is only prima facie valid, the project will investigate whether, and if so how, the concept of a sufficientarian threshold can be used to identify the conditions under which the prima facie claim is valid and under which it is not. A sufficientarian threshold suggests that the avoidance of risks of rights violations that could lead to people falling below the threshold of sufficiency should be given strong (or absolute) priority over the avoidance of set-backs of interests of people above the threshold. But when all strategies and policy responses to climate change are likely to impose some significant risks of the violation of rights on future as well as currently living people, weighing such risks implies a major challenge for a rights-based understanding and, in particular, for a rights-based sufficientarianism.

The project will investigate criteria for weighing the imposition of risks of rights violations and other set-backs of interests from the perspective of sufficientarianism. Such criteria include: the moral significance of the harm caused and the rights infringed, the amount of damage caused and the quantity of the possible rights violations, the moral quality of the action leading to the damages or rights violations, and the probabilities of the bad consequences. Assuming the unavoidability of some risks of rights violations and of other set-backs of interests, the project aims at developing an account of how to identify the least unjust option. Special focus will be given to the question of how to weigh the highly likely or certain set-backs of interests of currently living people against the imposition of risks of rights violations on future people.

[The project contributes to answering the DK research question 3](#)

Moral uncertainty about climate change: What is it, does it matter, and how?

(Main supervisor: Lukas H. Meyer)

We face both empirical and moral uncertainty about climate change. On the one hand we are uncertain about many of the possible future effects of e.g. continuing to emit at current levels. On the other, we are uncertain about what we morally ought to do. But we have to act despite this uncertainty, and here even inaction must be understood as a form of action

The project will attempt to clarify what moral uncertainty is by first investigating whether moral uncertainty is a type of epistemic or aleatory uncertainty and if so, what type and to what degree. In doing so the project will clarify whether and how empirical and moral uncertainty differ and how they are related for example by asking whether we can reduce moral uncertainty by reducing empirical uncertainty. It will further consider (amongst others) the following questions: Does the problem of moral uncertainty presuppose a meta-ethical commitment to objective moral truth – i.e., a commitment to thinking that there is a fact to be uncertain about – or does it arise even on other meta-ethical views?

Having developed this understanding of moral uncertainty and its relations to empirical uncertainty the project will investigate to what extent and in what areas we face moral uncertainty in the context of climate change. It will also discuss the significance and implications of moral uncertainty for justifying decisions on how to respond to climate change. Is it only specific kinds or degrees of moral uncertainty that matter? For example, instead of requiring certainty, can we be content here with justification or sufficient reason? Are there particular areas where the latter is enough for justifying decisions and others where we require certainty?

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