

Climate ethics in policy assessments: a pathway approach

Research agenda proposed by Dr. Martin Kowarsch and Dr. Dominic Lenzi

Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change (MCC), EUREF-Campus 19, 10829 Berlin, Germany. Email: kowarsch@mcc-berlin.net and lenzi@mcc-berlin.net.



Climate ethics as a ‘wicked’ problem

Climate policy is inherently complex: there are many interdependencies, it spans temporal and spatial scales, and it involves serious uncertainties. Decision-makers are still lacking a great deal of knowledge about policy options – i.e. of their direct effects, co-benefits and side effects, of the creation of winners and losers, and of some relevant policy fields, jurisdictions, scales, socioeconomic contexts, and so on. Likewise, there are no simple *ethical* solutions for climate policy, and many ethically relevant effects of such policies may not be readily apparent.

New directions in climate ethics: from principles of justice to policy pathways

From its initial focus upon general principles of justice and responsibility, climate ethics has steadily become more concerned with concrete policy issues. A promising recent development is the application of ‘non-ideal justice’ approaches, which depart from earlier discussions in attempting to reflect important political realities in climate policy, such as non-compliance, political feasibility, persistent uncertainties, and trade-offs.¹ Although these issues span a number of policy fields, there is still little interdisciplinary collaboration by philosophers, and limited engagement with the latest climate policy pathways and policy options, (e.g. in the most recent IPCC assessment reports).

Evaluating the practical implications of policy alternatives

In our view, ethics can contribute to integrated policy assessments by exploring alternative policy pathways and their various practical implications, jointly with stakeholders and in interdisciplinary collaboration. The focus of climate ethics would then be on concrete, alternative policy options and their various trade-offs or implications.² This approach promises to (1) bring disputed ethical principles or values to bear upon concrete policy options and their implications (i.e., alternative concrete futures) – which may facilitate iterated policy learning and pragmatic compromises between the otherwise irreconcilable divergent ethical viewpoints; and (2) to evaluate various implications of concrete policy options, further enhancing the policy relevance of climate ethics.

Test case: climate mitigation pathways in light of reliance on ‘negative emissions’

There is almost no ethical analysis of ‘negative emissions’, despite heavy reliance upon carbon removal techniques in most credible 2°C pathways. Given the wide-ranging possible consequences of large-scale implementation of negative emissions, ethical analysis should engage with the implications of prominent emissions pathways, in light of wider global justice concerns.

Potential collaborations: jointly with assessment experts and practitioners (IPCC, IPBES, GEO, etc.), along with philosophers and social scientists working on climate ethics, values and justice, MCC aims to organize an expert workshop in 2019 to discuss options for integrating ethics into large-scale assessments, especially related to land use issues and sustainable development.

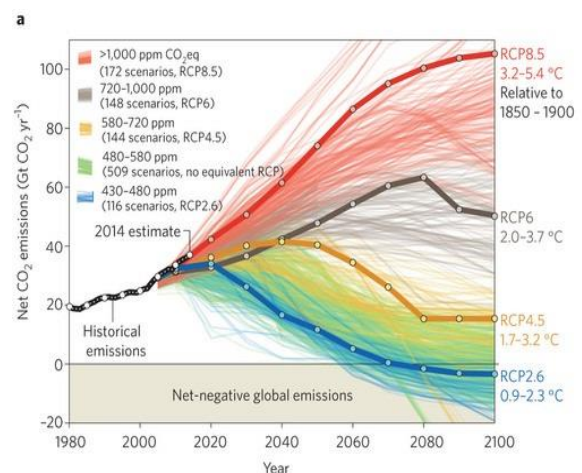


Image: Fuss et al. (2014, NCC)

¹ Clare Heyward and Dominic Roser, eds., *Climate Justice in a Non-Ideal World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

² Martin Kowarsch and Ottmar Edenhofer, “Principles or Pathways? Improving the Contribution of Philosophical Ethics to Climate Policy,” in *Climate Justice in a Non-Ideal World*, ed. Clare Heyward and Dominic Roser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 296–318.