Multi-Dimensional Consequentialism and Intergenerational Justice

The debate over climate justice is a debate over how we ought to distribute the burdens and benefits of alternative climate policies across future generations. Some authors think we should maximize the sum total of wellbeing across all future generations regardless of whether all generations would enjoy the same (average) level of wellbeing. Others argue that intergenerational inequalities should be assigned at least some weight: an equal distribution of wellbeing should (sometimes) be preferred to an unequal distribution, even if its sum total of wellbeing is lower.

The aim of this talk is to introduce a new theoretical perspective to the debate over climate justice, which I call multi-dimensional consequentialism. Multi-dimensional consequentialists believe that several irreducible aspects determine an act’s deontic status. These aspects sometimes clash. If no act is optimal with respect to all aspects, the all-things-considered ordering of consequences is incomplete and no act is entirely right, but rather right and wrong to some degree.

Imagine, for instance, that you could either (i) maximize the sum total of wellbeing across all future generations in a manner that would not give all generations the same (average) level of wellbeing, or (ii) implement a policy that would make all generations equally well off, but with a lower sum total of wellbeing.

For the multi-dimensional consequentialist who believes that each generation counts as a separate moral aspect, this is a case in which some aspect will remain unfulfilled no matter which climate policy is chosen. Therefore, both climate policies are somewhat wrong (that is, wrong to some degree). But each climate policy is also optimal with respect to at least one aspect, so therefore both policies are also right to some degree. It is the latter claim that it the most interesting part of the multi-dimensional analysis: What does it mean to say that a climate policy is, literally speaking, somewhat right but not entirely right? That is, that the policy is right and wrong to some (non-extreme) degree? And what are the practical implications for decision-making of these claims? In this talk I will try to answer both questions by drawing on some foundational ideas presented in my recently published book The Dimensions of Consequentialism (Cambridge University Press 2013.)