

Ratio

An international journal of analytic philosophy



University of
Reading

2024

Annual Ratio Conference

The Moral and Political Philosophy of Risk

University of Reading, Whiteknights campus

SATURDAY 4 MAY

SPEAKERS

Alex McLaughlin (Exeter)

Joseph Bowen (Leeds)

Rebecca Brown (Oxford)

Stephen John (Cambridge)

[Click here to register](#)

The Moral and Political Philosophy of Risk <i>Ratio</i> Conference
--

"But what's *my* chance of getting cancer?" Risk communication and the reference class problem

Stephen John (Cambridge)

Communicating information about individual risk is notoriously difficult, raising tricky questions about the relationship between epistemic and practical paternalism; for example, for some writers, "framing effects" pose a threat to autonomy, whereas for others, they are a valuable tool to promote understanding. This paper argues that heated debates over *how* to communicate risk must take into account an even more fundamental problem: that, unlike other numerical estimates such as blood pressure readings, given the "reference class problem", *what* counts as a proper claim about an individual's risk in the first place is epistemically underdetermined. I sketch various responses to the "what" risk problem suggesting that, ultimately, we cannot separate the question of what counts as "your" risk from broader ethical and political concerns. In the final sections of the paper, I do two things: first, I show how my account of *what* risks we ought to communicate relates to the more familiar debate over *how* we ought to communicate; second, I draw out some implications of my account of the ethics of risk communication for debates in moral and political philosophy over the ethics of risk imposition, suggesting some interesting practical and theoretical problems which arise if we assume both that values play a role in fixing "apt" risk claims and a plausible form of value pluralism.

What's the Point of Risk Communication?

Becky Brown (Oxford)

Risk communication is a central activity of health promotion. It is generally assumed and accepted that the primary goal of public health promotion is, unsurprisingly, to promote the public's health. Similarly, it might be assumed that risk communication, as a part of public health promotion, is rightly aimed primarily at promoting the health of the public. In this paper I question whether this is appropriate. Ought the primary goal of public health communication interventions be the promotion of public health, or rather, facilitating autonomous decision making amongst members of the public? I discuss proposals regarding the appropriate goals of public health activity in general and public health communication more specifically. I then consider a longstanding debate regarding the use of persuasion in public health communication, and argue that this discussion has been muddied by unclear and unhelpful use of the term 'persuasion' in this context. I argue that risk communication in public health ought to focus on informing rather than persuading. I then consider some objections to this reasoning: first, that the expectations of recipients of public health communication establish a norm whereby public health communication is legitimately aimed at directly changing behaviour rather than informing decision making. Second, I consider the broadly communitarian-inspired argument that focusing on the autonomy of individual decision-makers when it comes to health promotion unjustifiably privileges individuals over communities.

Rights: Beliefs, Evidence, or Facts?

Joe Bowen (Leeds)

While there is a large literature on whether our moral requirements depend on our beliefs, the evidence available to us, or the facts, there has been comparatively less attention paid to which perspective rights, and their correlative directed duties, depend on. This is a shame, as rights are relational in a way that requirements are not. When one holds a right, one holds that right against someone—the correlative duty-bearer. Yet, right-holders' and duty-bearers' access to the facts, the best available evidence, and their beliefs may be *drastically* divergent. Further, rights are often taken to be enforceable by third-parties. But the perspective of third-parties might be different, still, from the right-holder's and duty-bearer's perspective. As we see, this relationality creates complications when asking which perspective rights depends on which is not shared with requirements. This paper argues against the view that rights depend on people's beliefs and the evidence available to them in favour of the view that rights depend on the facts.

Existential Risk and the Politics of Longtermism

Alex McLaughlin (Exeter)

According to an increasingly prominent view known as *longtermism*, making the far future go well is a priority of our time. Longtermists claim that acting on this priority is primarily a matter of mitigating existential risks, which are understood as threats to humanity's long-term potential. In this paper, I reveal some ambiguities in longtermism's weak formulation, and raise some concerns about its political implications. First, I show that as a moral commitment weak longtermism can appear analytically trivial, in the sense that it could plausibly be endorsed by prominent accounts of intergenerational justice. Longtermists sometimes suggest that this is a virtue of their view, revealing its ecumenical credentials. But second, I argue that the practical conclusions that are taken to follow from weak longtermism in relation to the mitigation of existential risk are far from ecumenical. I develop this argument by examining Toby Ord's notion of a 'long reflection' and William MacAskill's claim that we should instigate a social movement that promotes the longterm value of humanity. The conclusion of the paper is twofold. First, if weak longtermism is a distinctive view, then this is because of its political commitments rather than its assertion that the far future matters morally. Second, longtermism, when understood as a set of political commitments about the future, is unattractive.