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Ethics Council hears experts on justice and responsibility in the face of climate change

Berlin, 22 February 2023

At a public hearing in Berlin on 23 February 2023, the German Ethics Council will question experts from philosophy and the social and economic sciences on issues of climate justice and climate ethics.

In November 2022, the German Ethics Council has started its enquiry into the ethical aspects of the climate crisis. In this early stage of work, the Council consults experts from philosophy and the social and economic sciences to assess the viability of certain ethical concepts – related among others to the theory of justice – that may be used in its deliberations. The Council wants to conduct its further considerations concerning climate change against the multidisciplinary background provided by this hearing.

The invited experts will each give ten-minute statements on important aspects of the ethical debate on climate change before answering questions from the Council members.

To begin with, ethics professor Angela Kallhoff from the University of Vienna provides an overview of the debate on climate ethics, including the question of what role ethics should play in the climate debate. In particular, she will describe the different dimensions of demands for climate justice.

Following this, psychologist and professor of health communication Cornelia Betsch from the University of Erfurt presents the results of the PACE study conducted at her university, which shows that an individual's willingness to act in a climate-friendly way depends significantly on the perception of health risks of climate change, self-efficacy and social norms.

According to Jörg Tremmel, professor of political science at the University of Tübingen, there is an individual responsibility to change one's lifestyle in the interest of climate protection such that one's personal carbon footprint is being reduced, even if others do not act in the same way.

Dieter Birnbacher, professor of philosophy at the University of Düsseldorf, considers warnings about the consequences of climate change to be more than mere alarmism. These consequences primarily affect people in poor countries. Because of their temporal, spatial and affective remoteness the fate of these people is easily ignored by those responsible for the present emissions. According to Birnbacher, this is an outrageous injustice.

Philipp Staab, sociology professor at Humboldt University Berlin, analyses in his statement the meaning of the demand for adaptation to climate change that is often raised in climate ethics. He points out that from a sociological perspective, the distinction between mitigation and adaptation is misleading, albeit well-established in climate policy.

Members

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Ottmar Edenhofer from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research explains that climate targets and the pathways to achieve them can be determined using cost–benefit analysis and cost–effectiveness analysis. In this context, it is ethically relevant which cost and damage categories are included and how future climate damage is discounted.

Because climate change is a global problem, it raises questions of global justice, says Simon Caney, professor of political theory at the University of Warwick (UK). One of these questions is: Who has what responsibilities to bring about a just transition from our unsustainable carbon-based economies to a fair and sustainable world?

The event will be broadcast online at www.ethikrat.org/live. Most of the hearing will be held in German; one statement and the concluding discussion will be in English. Registration is not required. A video recording and a transcription will be provided after the event.