

Corona, risks, and moral emotions

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Corona, emotions and scientific evidence

- In the first weeks of the Corona situation, people boasted that they were not worried
- Emotions were set aside as misleading
- Politicians emphasized to just 'follow science'

Affect in Decision Making under Uncertainty

- Emotion vs reason
- 'System 1' vs 'system 2'

Reference to:

Cass R. Sunstein – Laws of Fear

Paul Slovic – The feeling of Risk

Daniel Kahneman – Thinking Fast and Slow

Technocratic vs populist pitfall

Technocratic pitfall:

- Base risk policy solely on formal, quantitative methods

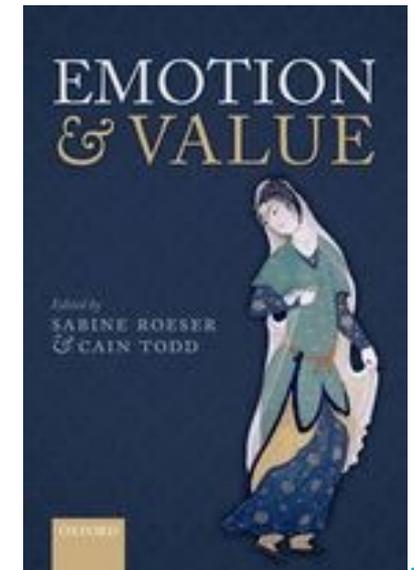
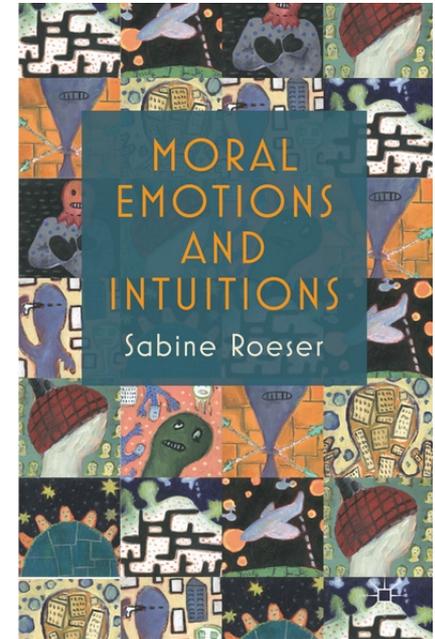
Populist pitfall:

- Using 'irrational emotions' to create support for risky technologies

- My claim: due to wrong understanding of emotions

Moral emotions and intuitions

- My own theory of moral emotions and intuitions:
- Emotions and intuitions indispensable source of ethical insight
- Direct moral perception.
- Attention for specific context:
- ‘Fingerspitzengefühl’.
- Help us to assess different cases.

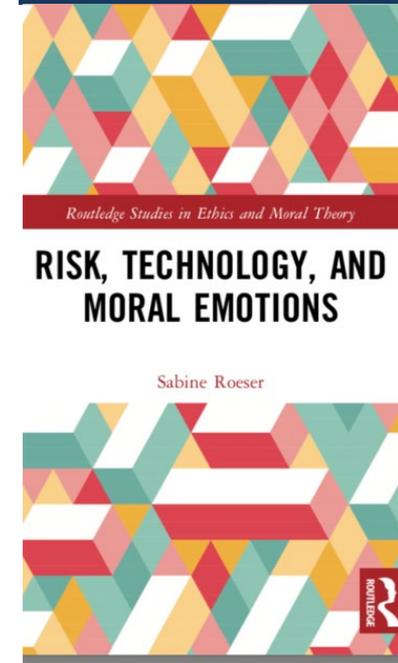
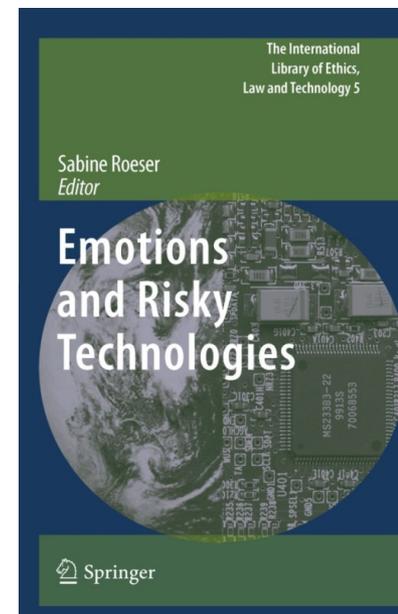


Moral emotions and risk decisions

- Sympathy, fear, indignation, enthusiasm
- Point to morally salient aspects of risks
- Such as autonomy and fairness

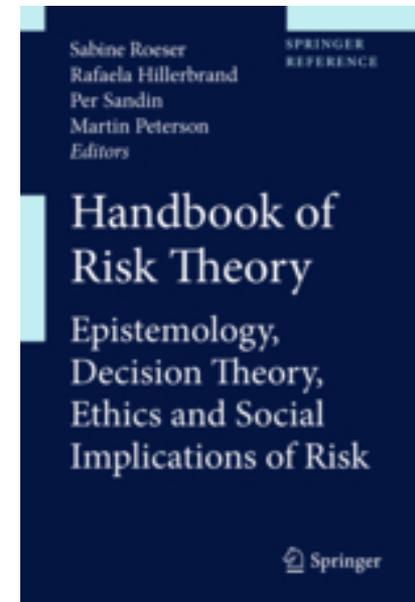
- In order to avoid e.g. ‘probability neglect’ (Sunstein 2005):
- → Moral emotions about risk have to be informed by science and statistics

- However, in order to avoid ‘complexity neglect’:
- → Decisions about risk have to be informed by moral emotions



Corona decision making involves ethics

- Fighting the Corona crisis and making decisions about trade-offs between different options:
- Scientific information is *necessary*
- but not *sufficient*.
- We also need societal and ethical considerations
- Emotions can reveal these.



Care and precaution

- Precautionary principle: we do not know how eg the contamination curve will progress, but let's intervene at an early stage and rather be overly cautious than too late.
- Risk ethics can help us approach this question:
- Swedish risk ethicist Sven Ove Hansson has argued that there is an important ethical difference between so-called "type-1" errors and "type-2" errors, i.e. false positives versus false negatives.
- In scientific research, we aim to prevent false positives, that is, false claims that something is the case.
- But in the context of for example health risks, we want to avoid false negatives, that is, false claims that someone is healthy while they are sick.
- This is based on an ethical consideration, namely that we would rather be safe than sorry.

Corona decisions and moral values

- What values are at stake, and how can we assess, compare, and weigh them?
- inconvenience and disruption of "social distancing"
- vs protection of public health and timely containment of the Corona pandemic.
- Group immunity: ethically acceptable if it means that some people will end up in intensive care units, when they would not have gotten sick under stricter measures?
- In view of uncertain knowledge about possible immunity against this new Corona virus, can it be ethically defended to make such an assumption?
- Triage: how to compare the need for ICU treatment of different patients?
- Fundamental ethical question: "what is the value of a human life?"
- Consequentialism: eg trade-off people's lives to avoid social disruption
- Deontology: human life is of such intrinsic value that it cannot be traded-off
- Government policy needs to find a balance

Corona strategies and values

- Laissez faire: group immunity (Sweden)

Business as usual for everyone, but huge health risks, especially for vulnerable people

- (Partial) lockdown (NI and many other countries):

Whole society is affected, partial containment of virus, uncertain evidence of spreading of virus

- Containment: intensive testing and selective quarantaine (Germany, South Korea, China)

Containment of virus, low number of deaths and shorter lockdown, but sophisticated testing, monitoring and health infrastructure needed

Corona and ethical foundations of political systems

- Most vulnerable disproportionately exposed to risks of pandemic:
- People without health insurance, steady income, and proper housing more exposed
- than wealthy people and citizens of affluent countries with well-functioning and accessible public health services and strong social safety net.
- Existing political and socio-economic infrastructure in society is based on ethical considerations
- and these contextual features need to be considered when ethically evaluating scenarios on how to deal with a pandemic.

Emotions, imagination and scenarios

- Virologists have warned for of a severe pandemic for years
- but apparently politicians around the globe are inventing on the go how to respond to the current situation.
- Why did governments not have scenarios and concrete action plans ready?
- Also on level of international politics?
- Lack of imagination?
- Emotions and imagination can play important role in developing future scenarios.
- The works of artists, film makers and writers could play an important role in such scenario thinking.
- Art works can appeal to the imagination, make abstract problems more concrete and facilitate ethical deliberation on the implications of such future scenarios.

Conclusion

- In order to take on the ethical challenges of this situation, we need to draw on our rich human capacities:
- scientific knowledge, insights from social sciences, arts, humanities and ethics, and emotional capacities.
- Rather than dismissing emotions, we should embrace them as a vital resource.
- Emotions such as compassion and feelings of responsibility and care can help reflect on ethical implications of the hard choices we face.
- These emotions can also play an important role in motivating acts of solidarity and courage that can hopefully contribute to solutions to the Corona crisis.