

# 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:

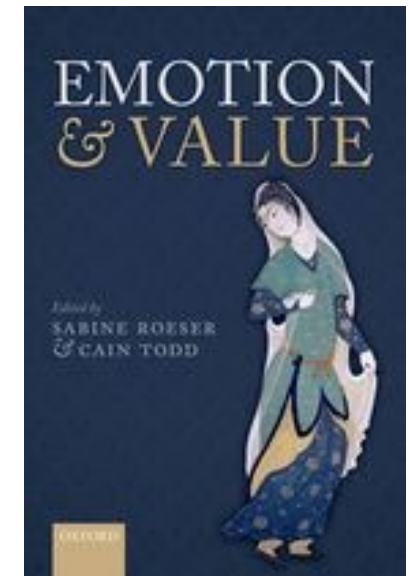
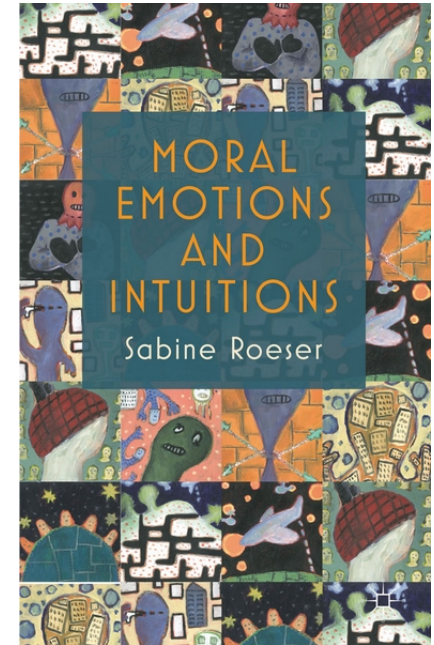
- Base risk policy solely on formal, quantitative methods

Populist pitfall:

- Using 'irrational emotions' to create support for risky technologies
  
- My claim: due to wrong understanding of emotions

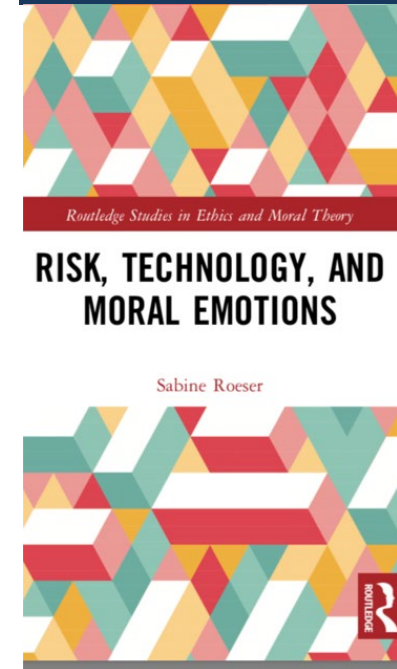
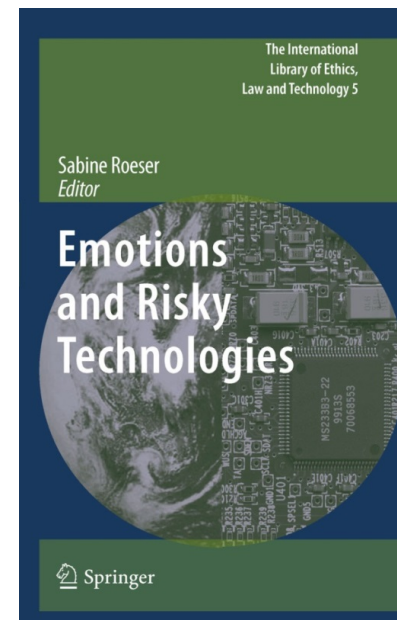
# Moral emotions and intuitions

- 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.



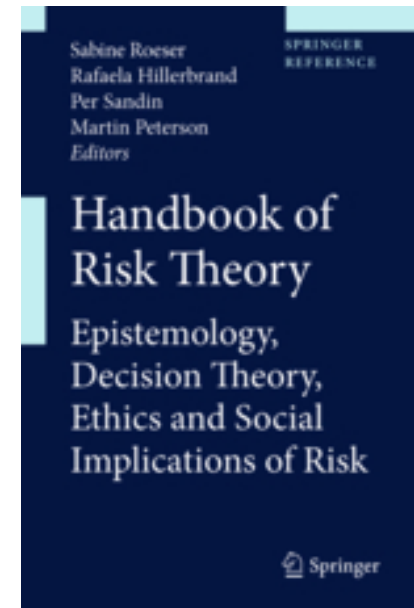
# Moral emotions and risk decisions

- 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.