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Justice: Past, Present and Future:

An Interview with Lukas H. Meyer

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The *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics* (*EJPE*) interviewed Meyer about his early influences and how he almost did not become a philosopher (sections I and II), his path from Berlin to Oxford and the extension of liberal political philosophy (section III), the threshold notion of harm (section IV), obligations to past people (section V), the supersession thesis (section VI), historical emissions and fair shares (section VII), the restitution of cultural artworks (section VIII), legitimate expectations (section IX), philosophy and the IPCC (section X), his future plans (section XI), and, finally, his advice for aspiring academics (section XII).

I. Early Influences

EJPE: If you think back, what initially drew you to philosophy generally, and specifically the kind of liberal egalitarian philosophy you practice today?

EJPE's Note: This interview was conducted in Rotterdam by Gideon Frey, editor at the EJPE with editorial assistance by Sieb Brouwer.

LUKAS H. MEYER: I went to school in Tübingen, to a humanities-oriented Gymnasium, and that experience made a big difference to me. It was a pretty small school, 500 pupils or so at the time, and I had a couple of major experiences that, looking back, can easily be seen to connect with things that are now very much at the center of my research interests.

One important figure was our school director, Professor Steinthal, who survived as a Jew in Nazi Germany. The Nazi past and questions of how one should relate and respond to one's duties of remembrance and so forth were present at that school, not imposed but clearly present. Steinthal had a particular way with his pupils. Not only did he know almost all of us by name. He would invite us to talk when there was any issue, and in such a way that you would end up having agreement or a reasonable disagreement. Without our realizing it at the time, he was engaging us in a practice of deliberative democracy at school, which typically is a very hierarchical institution. And that made a big impression on me.

Secondly, I had an introduction to philosophy by a teacher who joined the school when I was in my last three years of high school, Reinhold Aschenberg, who had done his dissertation on transcendental arguments. He offered, not philosophy as a proper subject, because that was not taught in Baden-Württemberg at the time, but a working group for those interested. He invited us to critically reflect on assumptions introduced to us as philosophical assumptions which, at least for some of us, clearly including me, were very central to our self-understanding. It was a liberating experience.

Also, like many people with my upbringing, I grew up in a Catholic family, had my experiences as an altar boy and so forth. And not untypically for people like me, having had doubts about my religious beliefs, I learned to systematically doubt them. The question of theodicy was one of my main concerns at that time.

Two more just quickly. My friend Linus, who is now a professor of Mathematics at Universität Münster, and I worked together in the so-called “Projektwoche” (project week). Pupils don't do any schoolwork that last week of the school year. The idea was to involve them in choosing the subject and allow pupils to do what they are really interested in. The things that you wanted to do at school during the school year, you were finally allowed to do at the end of the year. We, as 15-year-olds, investigated the causes of poverty and people dying of hunger. This may sound unsurprising today, but we found that this is a distributive justice

problem and I still recall how much it struck us that these horrible deaths were avoidable through institutional reforms. Maybe before we had done the work we had some intuition in that direction, but we had not been able to explicate it. And here we were able to explicate this point and share it with others because it was so important to us.

And then the fourth one from my school days. We did some theater, and brought to stage Günter Grass's "Örtlich betäubt" (*Local Anesthetic*), a play about young people in Berlin who are discussing how they should respond to the Vietnam War and in particular whether this one character should burn his dog in front of a famous café to protest the use of napalm. I played the cynical dentist who basically says all the things that you would reasonably say to these young people, but in a way that also shows that his moral antenna is at least dubiously directed. What was important here was less that we put that on stage than that Linus and I, as a part of this project, put together an exhibition on the *APO*, the extra parliamentary opposition. And as you might know, this is also the movement — if you can call it a movement — out of which the RAF (Red Army Faction) then emerged. We put together a pretty big exhibition, with photos, posters, reproductions and so forth. But mostly what we did was we seriously engaged, at least for people at that age, in this question of what means of protest could be legitimate. This put me on the path to take seriously some of these moral and ethical questions on international justice issues and political questions such as, what forms of protest, resistance and so forth can be legitimate in a society, in a world, that is clearly lacking in justice? That is an experience that I think put me on the path that I am on today.

II. ALMOST NOT A PHILOSOPHER

But to be very clear about this, I got into philosophy almost against my plan. When I started out as a student, I felt I could not possibly be good enough to do philosophy which seemed far too difficult a subject, and so I enrolled at the University of Tübingen, the town where I had been born and raised. I enrolled in history, political science and theology. Those were very different times. You could attend any course the university offered. There was no formal system of admission to individual courses. As a result, after two years of study at the University of Tübingen, I had completed all the coursework required for what was then called *Zwischenprüfung* in philosophy, without ever having been enrolled in

philosophy. And I also took the examination, because no one checked that. So you showed up, showed the courses that you had successfully completed, and there you were: you had completed your undergraduate work in philosophy.

So was it accidental?

No, no. I was drawn to it. What happened was that I went to some of these theology classes with my concerns and found myself among people who didn't share my concerns, as well as with professors who clearly didn't want to hear about them. History and also political science didn't really satisfy me in terms of my theoretical questions. There was a professor of political theory, Nikolaus Wenturis, who was doing good work at Tübingen at the time, and he was certainly one of the more interesting teachers. But I simply found myself in these philosophy courses. And after that — I also finished my courses in history and in political science — I just accepted that I was a philosophy student, I then moved on to study philosophy at the Freie Universität Berlin before going to the States for the first time.

III. FROM BERLIN TO OXFORD: EXTENDING LIBERAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

So you end up writing your dissertation with Joseph Raz. How did this come about?

It's actually a pretty long route, academically speaking. The reason for me going to the Freie Universität Berlin was that I wanted to study with Ernst Tugendhat, and taking courses with him was indeed an important experience. However, while I was in Tübingen, I had already applied to study in the United States, and then I accepted to go to Washington University in St Louis. The background was that when I graduated from high school, I barely spoke English, and I realized in my first semester at university that it would be impossible to do what I wanted to do without mastering English.

It may sound strange, but I learned academic English by translating *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971) from English to German, with the German translation beside me. I spent weeks getting the technical language right.

And then when I went to the States the aim, in part, was to learn how to actually converse in English. Before that, my English was very poor. At the time, a school like the Uhland-Gymnasium had wonderful teachers and a remarkably broad educational outlook. For example, early on in Latin and Greek class, I was introduced to questions of political legitimacy in the Roman Empire and related issues. The teachers were outstanding in that respect. English, however, was taught very poorly, and no one in my family spoke much English.

I arrived in the States with very little English, and then was very fortunate to end up at Washington University — not one of the top institutions, but a very good place — as I not only met a fellow student, Tony Daniel, a science fiction writer, but also professors who took an unusual interest in me, among them Carl Wellman and Stanley Paulson, and I am still friends with Stanley. Stanley is one of the foremost experts on Kelsen, if not the foremost. Having spent many years in Germany, he was someone with whom I could speak German.

Via a teaching assistant position, I was offered the opportunity to remain at the university and do a master's degree with Carl Wellman, who supervised my thesis on the method of reflective equilibrium.

I returned to Germany in December ’85. At that point I was uncertain about what I should do next. There was the unfinished business of my political science degree, and that is what I decided to do. I did not feel ready to move directly into doctoral work.

As it happened, the section of Law and Politics of the Otto-Suhr-Institut had an exchange program with Yale Law School, and I was offered a place. As a result, I was back in the US much sooner than I had expected. While I was a visiting student, Joseph Raz was a visiting professor. He taught a seminar on what would turn out to be his main work, *The Morality of Freedom* (Raz 1986). And that really set me on my path. There was also Bruce Ackerman and other people there who really made much of an impression on me in terms of introducing me to liberal political philosophy as it's understood in the Anglo-American tradition. At the time, Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre were also visiting. The courses I took there counted toward my political science degree at the Freie Universität Berlin. For my diploma thesis I worked on international justice, exploring how liberal political philosophy might be extended to international relations.

After completing the degree, I found myself in a situation where I did want to do a PhD, and at that time the Freie Universität Berlin didn't really

have much political philosophy so I contacted Joseph Raz, asked if he felt that I should apply, and so I did.

IV. THE THRESHOLD NOTION OF HARM

Your thesis, with Raz at Oxford, was part of a wider effort, with Brian Barry, Thomas Pogge and others at the time, to extend liberal egalitarianism from the national level to international and intergenerational questions. Could you explain the main claim of your thesis, what drew you to these questions to begin with and how you see what you wrote back then today?

I think the idea that I had when I was writing this dissertation is that when you look at the subject matter of political philosophy it was obvious, at least to me, that we would need to extend the subject matter. So, we can't pretend that what the subject matter is for political philosophy can be described as limited to individual states, or what some regarded as discrete basic units of political decision making. Theoretical challenges having to do with climate change, biodiversity and international and transnational justice clearly required a wider framework.

The research question that I pursued was, what are the theoretical challenges of extending the subject matter of political philosophy for inter- and transnational relations, on the one hand, and for intergenerational relations on the other. I found that some of the challenges are similar, while others differ significantly. In the thesis, I developed ideas that I later described as 'cosmopolitan communities'. I also proposed an account of how the non-identity problem might be addressed through a *threshold notion of harm*. In addition, I engaged with questions of moral motivation, although that is an area of research that hasn't stayed with me much.

I published several articles on the basis of the dissertation, but I never turned it into a monograph. Much of my later work reflects interests that I first pursued during my doctoral research, although it also moved well beyond the dissertation itself.

So one way in which it would go much beyond this, possibly coming back to this experience that I described before with Professor Steinthal, is that I understood that if you want to investigate transgenerational, intergenerational relations, you should not limit your analysis to the relations between currently living and future people, but you should

include in your analysis the relations between past, present and future people.

This became the central focus of my postdoc project. Bernhard Peters was instrumental in supporting it as an independent project, and Georg Mohr, as one of its reviewers, was equally supportive. That work eventually led to my book *Historische Gerechtigkeit* (*Historical Justice*; Meyer 2005), on the basis of which I completed the Habilitation at the University of Bremen. So, this is one, but I can give you an example of what I clearly had not understood or misunderstood when I was doing my PhD work.

In the dissertation I came up with and defended a particular interpretation of the threshold of harm response to the non-identity problem. At the time, I assumed that this response is very closely linked to a sufficientarian understanding of the threshold. Many years later, at a conference in honour of Brian Barry that I co-organized at the British Academy, David Heyd asked me a question about that assumption after I had given a paper on the non-identity problem. Only then did I realize that I had made that assumption and taken this connection for granted. The threshold-of-harm response itself does not determine how to substantively understand that threshold, that is, where and how it should be set. You could have an egalitarian understanding of the threshold. You could have a priority view understanding of the threshold. You could understand what that threshold requires in terms of a sufficiency notion, or in terms of maxima. And you could also have the idea that the threshold should be a threshold of perfection. None of these possibilities is ruled out by the threshold response to the non-identity problem. The argument requires only a non-comparative, yet person-affecting conception of harm. How you then substantively determine whether someone is harmed remains open and requires a separate normative argument.

I eventually realized that I had been implicitly relying on sufficientarian intuitions. I then took up the challenge of working out how the threshold notion of harm can be linked with a sufficiency view. That became a research interest I pursued. More recently in a paper co-authored with Thomas Pölzler (Meyer and Pölzler 2022), arising from a research project at the University of Graz on basic needs, we argued that the threshold-notion-of-harm response to the non-identity problem — which I think is the most plausible response — is best understood in terms of a notion of well-being that can be explicated on the basis of the

currency of basic needs and a sufficientarian understanding of what we owe to all living beings.

Do you think this sufficientarian threshold interpretation is only relevant in intergenerational relations or that it also applies among contemporaries?

I believe that sufficientarian justice should be understood as an account of what we owe to all people. However, I also think that its central significance lies in determining what we owe to future people whose lifetimes do not overlap with ours. In that sense, its distinctive relevance is largely limited to intergenerational relations. The reason is that, when it comes to relations among contemporaries, the demands of justice that people have vis-à-vis each other are stronger and more demanding than a sufficiency view explicates. This is why this paper is framed in terms of intergenerational justice (Meyer and Pölzler 2022). The underlying thought is that egalitarian concerns, when understood as instrumental concerns, have no relevance or only very limited relevance for relations among people whose lifetimes do not overlap. By contrast, among contemporaries, such concerns are much more significant, because inequalities can directly affect social relations, power structures, and opportunities for cooperation. Consequently, sufficientarianism seems better suited to addressing our obligations to future generations than to fully capturing the demands of justice among those who live at the same time.

Is it that contemporaries all contribute to some social venture, and that's why they have a stronger claim to more equal distributions? Because some cooperative ventures span non-overlapping generations. So for example, public debt or a pension system we all pay into: Could these justify more egalitarian distributions than just the sufficientarian threshold would allow?

I can see that. I do think that people are pursuing transgenerational projects and transgenerational projects that are meant to benefit currently living people and future people, and whose goals could not be realized unless they were continued in the future. I have called these ‘strongly future-oriented projects’. When pension systems, your example, are built in such a way that each generation pays for the pensions of the

preceding generation, then every generation has an interest in the continuation of the scheme.

But there are other future-oriented projects that are a bit different in the way in which benefits are being distributed among the generations. For instance, we are sitting in a building of the Erasmus University campus, and I think most of these buildings were constructed in the 60s and 70s. Clearly, they are meant to benefit many generations of students. Infrastructure projects often have this long-term orientation. Indeed, initiating such projects would frequently make little sense unless the beneficiaries are mainly future people. Something similar can also be said about museums and related cultural institutions.

I also think that when we do philosophy, we take part in a transgenerational project whose meaning — so the conditions of success — depends on people before us having done philosophy, and on people in the future being interested in doing the same: that they take up what our generation will have done in philosophy. Many of us, therefore, participate in transgenerational and future-oriented projects that are intended not only to benefit the currently living, but also or primarily, future people. The question of the proper and fair distribution of net benefits over these generations is one that we cannot answer on the basis of a sufficientarian understanding. The goods these projects aim to realize clearly go beyond what sufficiency requires.

Take the example I mentioned last: philosophy. We want our work to be as good as it can be, and we hope that the results will be significant for people who will work in philosophy also in the future. I think, this has more to do with perfectionist ideas than requirements of justice when we talk about how we go about philosophy. The same can be said of infrastructure or cultural institutions. Consider a museum. The aim is not simply to ensure that people have enough access to culture to satisfy some threshold requirement. Rather, the goal is to enrich people's experience of art, to expose them to traditions and modes of understanding that might otherwise be unavailable, and to contribute to the transmission of cultural values across generations. Our engagement in projects of this kind therefore cannot be fully captured by a sufficientarian account of what people are owed as a matter of justice. Such projects involve aspirations and values that go beyond sufficiency and beyond the demands of justice narrowly understood.

V. OBLIGATIONS TO PAST PEOPLE

In talking about these transgenerational cooperative ventures you clearly emphasized the benefits to the present and the future. To what extent can we wrong — or at least harm — those in the past? At least my sense is that your focus is largely on the present and future, and that you have some suspicion of purely backward-looking views, though I might be quite wrong here.

When I first started thinking seriously about obligations to past people, I was influenced by an idea proposed by Carl Wellman in his book *Real Rights* (1995), which I believe was the last book he published. This is the same Wellman who supervised my thesis on the method of reflective equilibrium. In a short section of that book, he develops the notion of "surviving duties", which struck me as a promising way of approaching the issue.

There is a substantial debate in analytical philosophy about how best to understand how we can relate to deceased people and what we owe to deceased people. The basic problem is this: how can we owe something to deceased people when they are no longer among the entities that can plausibly be understood to be bearers of claims vis-à-vis currently living people.

So why should we care? Many of us do care about those who have died, and the philosophical challenge is to explain why. Feinberg did important work on this issue (Feinberg 1984). The basic idea that I worked out in quite some detail in my book (Meyer 2005) is that people, when alive, have interests, including interests in future states of affairs and even posthumous states of affairs. Other people can stand in a normative relation to these interests and therefore owe it to these people to protect them. When such interests are strong enough, you can say that people while alive have rights, moral rights, to having these future states of affairs realized. And other people can stand under the corresponding duties. The key thought is that the normative reasons supporting these duties can survive the death of the rights-holder. Even after a person has died, those who bear the corresponding duties may still remain obligated, despite the fact that the deceased person no longer exists as a bearer of claims. This is the central idea behind surviving duties.

I worked this out with a good number of examples. Some concerned obligations from the Nazi past, while others concerned indigenous

peoples. In particular, I discussed Jews, Roma and Sinti, and the Sámi. I argued that at least some of what is owed to members of these groups can be understood in terms of surviving duties. It is a view that I continue to find convincing.

More recently, Tim Waligore, a colleague with whom I worked on historical injustice, particularly on the supersession thesis in a project funded by the Austrian Science Fund, has returned to this topic. In a recent paper (Waligore 2026), he develops and defends the idea of surviving duties further.

I just quickly wanted to go back to your Jewish director in Tübingen, that you mentioned as an early influence. Tracing the genealogy of your own thoughts, do you think that both your interest and your stances can be partially traced back to those kinds of early engagements?

As I said, at school the question of how to relate to the Nazi past was very present, because you had this wonderful person who, as I said, was able to relate to us pupils in this non-hierarchical way, made an effort to understand and relate to us as equals, despite schools and universities being such hierarchical places back then. There was, in particular, the question of how do I relate to the fact that this person whom I appreciated so much — how can I relate to the fact that for many years when he was a child, he was at risk of being killed by people of the generation of my grandparents for being a Jew? And then, of course, you have complicated family stories. There's essentially no family in Germany that didn't have its Nazis. The question of how to relate to that was clearly present. So these were questions that clearly informed me, and made me take this dimension of social identity rather seriously.

VI. THE SUPERSESSION THESIS

So, turning to Waldron's supersession thesis — the question of whether duties for past injustices can be superseded over time — could you maybe just give a very basic introduction of the main claim and how you understand it?

I became interested in the supersession thesis early on. It's clearly one of the most interesting theses advanced in the American analytical political

philosophy discussion on historical justice of the late 20th century, put forward by David Lyons and Jeremy Waldron (Lyons 1977; Waldron 1992). The basic claim is that the normative consequences of historical injustices can change, owing to changes of circumstances. The validity of the claims that people have when they first became victims of injustice — claims to restitution, compensation, or, more broadly, reparations — these claims can lose their validity, owing to changed circumstances. Intuitively, many people find this rather plausible: Consider the case of Manhattan, and ask whether it makes sense to say that the territory of Manhattan should be restituted to the Indigenous community that had lived there and had been wrongfully expelled from their homeland.

The first paper I wrote on the supersession thesis was on the Palestinians' right of return (Meyer 2004) — a case that has also been discussed by Waldron and Andrei Marmor (see Waldron 2004; Marmor 2004). My argument was that the claims of the Palestinians had not been superseded. The conditions required for supersession were not met. At the same time, this leaves open what the right to restitution can realistically amount to under present circumstances. Even if a claim remains valid, the form its realization should take may be constrained by current realities. So there are many things one could say about this, but in any case, my sense early on was that while it made sense, theoretically, to claim that the validity of such historical claims can be superseded, it actually proves remarkably difficult to establish that supersession has actually occurred when you look into any particular case of historical injustice in detail.

One reason these debates become so complicated is that different kinds of claims need to be distinguished. In recent work, Tim Waligore and I have tried to bring more clarity to the discussion by introducing several important distinctions (Meyer and Waligore 2023; Meyer and Waligore 2024). First, we argue that restitution claims and compensation claims should be treated separately. Second, with respect to restitution claims, it is important to distinguish between partial and full supersession, and also between preliminary and final supersession. A restitution claim may, for example, be partially superseded while still retaining some force. Likewise, what appears to be supersession may only be provisional rather than definitive, because changing circumstances could alter the situation again in the future. However, we argue that claims to compensation cannot be superseded. It is mistaken to think that the amount of compensation necessarily decreases over time; and if you

look into restitution claims you often find that they are only partially and preliminarily superseded, while compensation claims remain intact and the amount of compensation owed might increase.

Okay, so that's the kind of thinking that we developed. To come back to what you asked me before: surviving duties are clearly backward-looking. Such duties are grounded in the reasons for the claims that people had while they were alive. Similarly, the supersession thesis presupposes — otherwise you wouldn't even get started with supersession — that there are backward-looking claims to restitution and compensation. The question is what happens when these backward-looking claims come into conflict with other moral considerations, especially forward-looking concerns of distributive justice. Do claims arising from historical injustice always have priority, or can they sometimes be outweighed by competing claims that arise in the present?

My own view is quite nuanced on this point. I do believe that there are genuine backward-looking reasons for restitution and, especially, for compensation. If some people have the impression that I am generally skeptical of backward-looking approaches, that may stem from my views on historical emissions and climate justice, where I have argued that the moral significance of past actions must be understood in a particularly qualified way. But that should not be taken to imply a general rejection of backward-looking grounds of justice. On the contrary, both my work on surviving duties and my engagement with the supersession thesis presuppose that such grounds are often morally important and can generate genuine obligations in the present.

VII. HISTORICAL EMISSIONS AND FAIR SHARES

My view is the following. Given that up to roughly 1990 causing emissions by engaging in emission-generating activities was, as many would argue, not generally blameworthy, the responsibility of individual people and other agents, including states, for their pre-1990 emissions cannot be understood in terms of compensatory justice. Instead, their significance should be understood in terms of the consequences of these emissions for the distributive claims that people today and in the future have. The emission-generating activities of the past, pre-1990 for instance, have highly unequal effects in terms of the benefits for people today and in the future.

Again, consider the buildings on this university campus. The emissions generated in constructing them in the 70s and 80s continue to benefit people today. We are benefiting from them right now as we sit here having this conversation. When you then ask, what is the significance of these past emission-generating activities, I think we should focus on the unequal distribution of benefits they created. The relevant question is not primarily whether those who generated the emissions acted wrongly, but rather how the benefits resulting from those emissions should affect the distribution of present and future entitlements.

The argument is that when allocating the remaining permissible emissions, that is, the emissions budget that is compatible with avoiding what has often been called catastrophic climate change, we should take into account how the benefits of emission-generating activities have been distributed across people's lifetimes. This includes not only the benefits people derive from their own emissions, but also the benefits they inherit from the emissions generated by earlier generations.

The idea is that, when it comes to our own emissions during our lifetimes — from a certain age onward, and since 1990 or whatever date, and that date will differ between people, depending on what they were liable to know — clearly these emissions and the benefits they had from their own emission generation count toward their budgets, but what also counts is the benefits they have realized owing to the emission-generating activities of past people. What earlier generations did affects the distributive claims that people have today, even if those earlier generations are not blameworthy for what they did. In this sense, the view is forward-looking.

Some critics argue that this underestimates the role of backward-looking compensatory justice. What I have always emphasized, however, and what perhaps receives less attention, is that failures of distributive justice themselves generate duties of compensatory justice. If individuals, corporations, or states fail to remain within their fair shares of the remaining emissions budget, they violate duties of distributive justice. Once that happens, compensatory duties arise. High emitters who continue to exceed their fair shares create harms for others, and those harms generate obligations of compensation. So, my approach integrates a backward-looking dimension that has become increasingly important because individuals and collective actors have repeatedly failed to fulfil their forward-looking duties of distributive justice since, for example, 1995, despite being morally required to stay within their fair shares.

Because of the harm I've created by overstepping my fair share, so because of this non-compliance, I then stand under compensatory duties?

Exactly. It's not compensatory duties owing to what these pre-1990 people did, but compensatory duties owing to what people since then have done in terms of failing their distributive justice duties. So my account is backward-looking, but in a different way from traditional approaches. The focus is not on compensating for historical emissions as such. Rather, it is on compensating for more recent failures to act justly in light of what was known about climate change and the remaining carbon budget.

I should also add that I do not regard 1990 as a rigid or universally applicable date. It is significant because it was the year in which the first IPCC report was published. These reports include a summary for policymakers, which is a rather special document, because it is negotiated and agreed upon line by line by representatives of the states. What you find there is clearly what you can attribute to states as what they knew: that high-emitting states need to reduce their emissions drastically, and that delay is prohibitively costly. In my work I go for the conservative interpretation, 1995, because there these findings were confirmed and made more explicit. For particular states you might find reason to set an earlier date; for certain companies clearly so — look at Exxon's internal documents — and for certain individuals also. And there are individuals even today who might not be liable to know. So it would be a mistake to fix a single date that applies uniformly to all agents.

VIII. RESTITUTION OF CULTURAL ARTWORKS

There are actually three, maybe four, major areas where I have worked in applied philosophy — in applied political philosophy and in applied ethics. One of them emerged from my interest in the non-identity problem and concerns reproductive duties.

As a bit of personal background: I had a brother, Titus, who unfortunately died in February 2024. He suffered from an illness that meant he never spoke a word and needed 24-hour care all his life. Titus, the oldest of three children, lived with our family, and I remained home until we found a place in an institution for him, because my parents were

not able to look after Titus by themselves, and my sister — I'm the youngest — had left earlier to study medicine. The fact that I stayed in Tübingen for the first two years of my studies was closely connected to my family situation. When I graduated from school, I felt — and many of my classmates felt the same — that Tübingen was a wonderful place, but there must be more than Swabia. Living with my brother and sharing responsibility for his care meant that questions about disability, well-being, and reproductive decision-making were not merely abstract philosophical issues for me. They were part of everyday life. That experience strongly influenced my interest in reproductive ethics and reproductive duties. So that question was one of those I investigated as a matter of applied ethics. The others: I mentioned the supersession thesis and how it can be understood in particular cases. Then there is work that has taken a long time, because it's genuinely interdisciplinary: work on emission budgets and their fair allocation, which I do with colleagues at the University of Graz — mostly with economists, but for the first of our papers also with a climate physicist: Karl Steininger, Keith Williges, Gottfried Kirchengast, and others. Together, we have examined questions of fair emissions allocation at the international level between countries (Williges et al. 2022), as well as at regional and national levels. I have also explored whether fair-share approaches can help determine what constitutes a fair emissions budget for individuals in their leisure activities.

Then there is the topic that you brought up: the restitution of colonial cultural objects and artworks. I became involved in this by invitation: the Deutsches Historisches Museum was dealing with a restitution claim concerning a padrão — one of the stone columns that the Portuguese took with them on their explorations and put up at places they reached and wanted to claim for themselves — not necessarily land that they would settle in or where they would invest in. And in this particular case, Namibia formally requested the return of the padrão which is one of the best restored examples. The negotiations surrounding its restitution were widely perceived as being connected to broader and ongoing discussions about the reparations that Germany owes for the genocide committed against the Herero and Nama in what had become the colony of German Southwest Africa.

I continue to teach on these issues through a collaboration with colleagues in Indonesia. Together, we teach a seminar with students from

Indonesia and Graz on historical injustice, transitional justice and, especially, restitution.

The Namibian padrão case is particularly interesting because it is not one of the clearest restitution cases. It wasn't taken under circumstances that are obviously wrongful. When Germany assumed control of the region — Southwest Africa, as it was called — after the Berlin Conference, officials found the column. It had fallen over, and apparently, it had lain unnoticed for a long time. The Germans transported it to Germany and replaced it with a marker of their own: "Oh yeah, that's now ours; the Portuguese are no longer relevant." The situation was therefore quite different from cases such as the Benin Bronzes, where objects were seized in the aftermath of military conquest and armed violence. Nor did Portugal itself make a claim for the object's return. The question then was how one can then understand Namibia's restitution claim. The argument I put forward in the article (Meyer 2018) — which I was also allowed to present at the conference held at the Deutsches Historisches Museum with scholars from Namibia and Germany, mostly giving expert opinions — was that the question can be answered in forward-looking terms. The central question, as I saw it, was this: if you take into account the interests that people have in this object, whose interests carry greater weight? My argument was that Namibia had a particularly strong interest in possessing the padrão because it's one of the few cultural artefacts that document the earliest phases of colonial engagement in the region. By contrast, the interests of the museum, or of European audiences more generally, in retaining the object were very limited: the relevant scientific work had been completed; no one was claiming that research required the object's continued presence in Berlin; and it was hardly the central attraction of the museum's collection. Plus, restitution would not prevent the museum from telling the story. Quite the opposite. The museum could display a replica or substitute while explaining the history of the object's return. In many ways, that story might be more informative and engaging than simply exhibiting the original object. I also put the argument in terms of cultural self-determination — not just as an argument about the interests of individuals, but about the interests of people as members of cultural and political groups. Cultural objects can play an important role in how groups understand, interpret, and represent their own histories.

The padrão was returned to Namibia, but the outcome turned out to be less than straightforward. As far as I know, despite the intentions of those involved in negotiating the restitution, the monument has still not

been reinstalled; instead, it remains in storage. There are likely several reasons for this. The most important, I suspect, is the broader political context. The negotiations about reparations for the Herero and Nama were concluded by the negotiating teams — they worked on this for many years — but the agreement was never fully completed because it did not receive parliamentary approval in Namibia. Among the reasons for this were disagreements about Germany's refusal to characterize its proposed measures as reparations and concerns among descendants of the Ovaherero and Nama that they had not been adequately included in the negotiation process.

So, I think the padrão case is a particularly instructive example of restitution in the colonial context. It's interesting, not only because it's maybe a more difficult case than others to assess, but also because of how it played out. The eventual course of events diverged significantly from what many of the advocates of restitution had intended and expected.

IX. LEGITIMATE EXPECTATIONS

If you could maybe quickly speak about your work on legitimate expectations, what they are and what brought you to this research.

When thinking about climate change, one of the central challenges is the transition to climate neutrality. The question, then, is what normative theory can contribute to our understanding of such a transformation. There is a long-standing debate about just transitions. I have contributed to these discussions, namely when it comes to just transitions from dictatorships to democratic regimes based on the rule of law: As part of my postdoc work on historic injustice, I investigated truth commissions and also the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court. When it comes to this forward-looking transition to climate neutrality, the question is what we might be able to offer on the basis of insights of transitions from dictatorships to regimes based on the rule of law. In these cases, the concern is that we need to balance backward-looking and forward-looking justifications of responding. One way this has been put is as a conflict, in our understanding of the justification of truth commissions, between truth and justice — where justice is understood in part as punitive justice. However, the transition to climate neutrality poses somewhat different questions. Here, the issue is not primarily how to address a legacy of

political repression, but how to understand the burdens associated with large-scale social transformation aimed at avoiding what has been called catastrophic climate change. One dimension of this transformation concerns the costs, the net burdens, that high emitters incur when they are required to stay within their fair shares of permissible emissions. We came to think of many of these costs as arising from the need to revise expectations. The question is what normative significance it can have that these people — basically people like us — have had expectations, and arguably legitimate expectations for some time, to cause emissions in an amount far above average, compared with how many emissions people on average across the globe, and in particular people in other regions of the world, have caused. The investigation of how to deal with expectations — how to understand expectations to be legitimate, how they can lose legitimacy, what, if anything, is owed to those whose expectations are frustrated and how people are responsible for revising their expectations — is responding to this issue.

Before the interview, you mentioned you don't view this work on legitimate expectations as non-ideal or applied work. And surely it's not applied, in the sense of casuistry, where you see a case study, the philosopher picks their ethical theory and just applies that to the case itself; but the work still seems driven by ethical questions generated from real-life cases. Something Ingrid Robeyns talks about in her interview with the EJPE (Brouwer and Buitenhuis 2018), and in some of her work, is a distinction between theory-driven philosophizing where we primarily respond to gaps and problems in the literature (the squabbling over Rawls's footnotes for the sake of it); and problem-driven philosophy where we attempt to use philosophical tools to aid and make sense of real-life political problems. So is one way of framing your work on legitimate expectations as being problem-driven, so being philosophically rigorous but motivated by clear and urgent political challenges? That is, of course, if you buy that distinction.

I'm not sure that I do accept the distinction, at least not in the way it is sometimes presented. If someone were to ask me how I have done philosophy, I would say that all of my work has been problem-driven in a broad sense. I would actually be surprised if many moral and political philosophers gave a very different answer. Consider the method of reflective equilibrium: why are we interested in justifying moral principles

or principles of justice at all? Because we face a problem. We live under conditions of pluralism. We want to understand how we can respond to others who disagree with us and are just as convinced of their position as we are of ours. Philosophy is, among other things, an attempt to make sense of that predicament and to determine how we should respond to it.

Of course, many people have, and I certainly have, been interested in some rather arcane — that is, to most people arcane — academic philosophical questions. One might reasonably wonder whether the details of working out basic needs sufficientarianism can make much of a difference to how we respond to problems in the world. You might think once the basic idea is in place and reasonably defensible, little more is required from a practical perspective. But, of course, when we do philosophy, we do our work as well as we can, judged by the standards of the practice of doing philosophy, and this is what makes it scholarly work: We generally assume that there are multiple ways of understanding a given problem and multiple candidate solutions. The task is to determine which of these can be best justified when all relevant considerations are taken into account. That is what makes the work rigorous and scholarly, even when its practical implications are not immediately apparent. For those reasons, I don't think of my work on legitimate expectations as applied philosophy. By contrast, some of the projects I mentioned earlier are more clearly applied because of the close relation that the results of that research have to justifying rules of regulation. Consider the work that I do with economists on the fair allocation of budgets. It is intended to provide guidance to policy makers, states and other collective actors. One of the enduring challenges in these negotiations is determining how much of the remaining permissible emissions budget each state can fairly claim.

We really bring it down to numbers as a result of this interdisciplinary work. We translate the normative considerations of historical responsibility and basic needs sufficientarianism into criteria and translate these criteria into proxies allowing us to estimate how different normative considerations affect the allocation of emissions budgets.

The example of the padrão is also an example of applied work. This is expert advice on how a particular restitution claim should be understood and resolved. The work is relevant for answering questions of principles of regulation, but it goes further, namely in arguing for returning this object to Namibia. Similarly, my work on reproductive duties as well as on the significance of the supersession thesis for particular cases bears

on justifying rules of regulation and on justifying conclusions about how to respond to particular cases.

But with the work on legitimate expectations, what we are primarily trying to do is not to work out what a particular institution should do, or what rule of regulation we ought to adopt, or how a specific case should be resolved. Rather, we are trying to understand a normative predicament. We want to understand what is at stake for people, especially high emitters, when they are required to participate in profound social transformations, such as the transition to climate neutrality. How should we understand the expectations they have formed? Why might these expectations matter morally? And what, exactly, is involved when people are asked to revise their self-understandings and life plans? The project is therefore less directly action-guiding than my work on emissions budgets or restitution. It is primarily an attempt to clarify the normative significance of a phenomenon that any adequate account of large-scale social transformations must confront (Meyer and Sanklecha 2014; Meyer and Truccone 2025).

X. PHILOSOPHY AND THE IPCC

You, together with John Broome and Marc Fleurbaey, were the only philosophers that had worked on the IPCC reports. I know that at least the way Broome (2019) talks about this experience, it changed his views on the role that political philosophy, especially climate ethics, should play: that we cannot just hope that others are interested in what we have to say to each other, but that we need to engage in more interdisciplinary work. Could you share your experience at the IPCC, and if or how it changed your views?

That's certainly one of the main lessons I took from the experience as well. The interdisciplinary work with economists and climate physicists that I mentioned before, I started only after I had worked as a lead author of one of the chapters of the Fifth Assessment Report — Chapter 3 of Working Group III. This is the working group on mitigation, and that chapter is a so-called framing chapter (Kolstad et al. 2014). It sought to clarify how one can understand the contribution of several disciplines, including philosophy, in understanding the challenge of climate change.

There are many things worth mentioning here, maybe the first thing that's interesting: how did philosophy get there?

This is largely due to Ottmar Edenhofer, who is professor of economics at the Technical University of Berlin and one of the directors of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. As co-chair of IPCC Working Group III on *Mitigation of Climate Change* he believed that an important dimension was missing from previous assessment reports. He wanted normative theory to be part of the IPCC assessment process. The reason was twofold. On the one hand, he had a lifelong interest in philosophy and studied the subject himself. He recognized that climate ethics had developed into a significant area of philosophical research from the early 1990s onwards, yet this body of work had not been systematically reviewed in the IPCC assessments. On the other hand, although he came to these questions mostly as an economist and I as a philosopher, we realized at a workshop that there was a great deal of common ground between us.

Then I was subsequently invited to participate in an IPCC scoping meeting. This is the meeting that the IPCC holds to agree on the chapters of the assessment report. Even though several of us argued strongly for a philosophy chapter, in particular a justice chapter, the representatives of the US in particular did not want to have 'justice' appear anywhere.

This was before 2014, so the Obama administration did not want to have "justice" appear in the report?

At least the individuals representing them, yes. The assessment reports are meant to give a critical review of the state of affairs of climate research that potentially is relevant for policymakers and can, when summarized in a proper way, namely by the summary for policymakers, be shown to be relevant for understanding what the challenges are and how to respond to them. But they are meant to be a critical review, that is what these assessment reports are about.

The challenge was, how can we still get philosophy in there? It took a lot of consistent effort, but ultimately, it was possible to bring philosophy into the framing chapter. The question of whether or not justice may appear in the report came back to us because the texts of the IPCC are reviewed in a number of stages, including the stage, the Second-Order Draft Review, where you have simultaneous review by experts and governments.

I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say I had to respond to hundreds of comments by a group of people who objected to virtually every

occurrence of terms such as fairness, justice and so forth. The basic argument for keeping these terms in was: well, we cannot properly review the literature that uses terms like justice or fairness without ever mentioning them. Of course, not all comments were like that; I also responded to substantive and constructive comments. But many of these comments were aimed at undermining the idea that you could contribute to an understanding of climate change from the perspective of normative theory. Politically speaking, it was very much disputed that philosophy should come into this at all.

John Broome and I exchanged views on how we assessed what got into the Summary for Policymakers. If you ask whether the work was relevant for how the summary for policymakers understood the challenge of climate change, that is, whether it was informed by philosophical ideas of climate justice, then this was a limited success. But I think it was quite a success in terms of the service that we, the philosophy authors, did to the community of normative theorists working on climate change, because they found themselves and their issues represented in the report in a highly accessible way.

And I also learned a lot about how one can make these discussions, findings, claims, accessible, and how one can present them in such a way that they can be shown to be connected with questions of other disciplines, especially disciplines from the social sciences and law. So in that sense, I think this chapter was quite a success, and for me personally, it was the beginning of an interdisciplinary collaboration, mostly, but not only, at the University of Graz, leading to, among other things, the interdisciplinary doctoral program on climate change that we had for eight years — I was the main applicant for that to the FWF and the leader of the project — where we had 40-plus doctoral students working on climate change from many disciplines, including philosophy. Your colleague Laura García-Portela is a graduate of that program. Before I mentioned also the work I contributed to the fair allocation of CO2 budgets which also comes out of that.

I have no ambition to be a public philosopher. Or let me put it this way: if by public philosopher you mean people who, from the perspective of philosophy, contribute to public debates on which they cannot claim particular expertise, then I'm highly sceptical of that role. I think you should contribute as a scholar only if and insofar as you have done research yourself that led to results that you believe to be important in understanding issues of public interest. I think people should be careful

about the capacity in which they contribute to public debates. So it's perfectly fine, and indeed important, for informed citizens to contribute. But when it comes to debates in areas in which they are not experts, I don't think people should present themselves as contributing in any capacity other than that of informed citizens. Clearly, this work with the IPCC, of course, is work where, as a result of having been part of this, you are being approached and have more opportunity to share some of your expertise with journalists and in the media and so forth. But this doesn't, to me at least, change my understanding of how you should go about contributing to public debate.

XI. FUTURE PLANS

Where do you see your research going in the next few years, and what do you believe are the most pressing or promising areas in political philosophy? Do you have research plans, medium to long term, that still interest you?

I have worked on a monograph on climate justice and also continue work on historical injustice. During my sabbatical the monograph was my main project. And a challenge, of course, with working in this area of climate ethics, climate justice, is understanding what changing circumstances can mean for our philosophical and normative work. In this case, those changing circumstances concern how the United States, under the new president, is responding to climate change, taking a very different approach from the previous administration.

The results in terms of what the fair budgets are, and what the fair budget of the US is, are not affected at all. What I said before about how failures to meet forward-looking distributive justice duties generate compensatory justice duties also applies here. What the US is likely to owe under Trump and beyond, also considering that the failure has been ongoing, will be much more substantial: different in magnitude and likely qualitatively different as well.

Taking these changing conditions into account is a challenge, but one that can be met. One particularly interesting aspect is that changing circumstances arguably also mean that others, namely those who are willing to do their part, might have to do more. And in the context of another collaborative research project, we hope to contribute to a further

investigation of these responsibilities under conditions of widespread non-compliance.

Moreover, I think that the work that I did, and the work I did with other people in projects on historical justice and the supersession thesis, should be synthesized and presented in a systematic way. I have not yet done that, but I would like to. At the same time, there are many topics in philosophy that are well worth pursuing, and I don't think I'm in a position to prioritize among them.

XII. ADVICE FOR ASPIRING ACADEMICS

If you look back, what kind of advice would you give your younger self, or general advice for young aspiring academics and students?

This is a difficult one. I have told you about my rather complicated path into philosophy, and there is not much advice to be drawn from it. One thing I find worth mentioning, however, is that when people find themselves in a situation where they are well supervised and genuinely supported in their research, they have good reasons to stay. Even though I moved around a great deal, one thing I would advise young academics to do is to appreciate such situations. A strong culture in which senior scholars support junior scholars and colleagues work together constructively is something not to take for granted.

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