



Seminar

## H. ORRI STEFÁNSSON

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### *The Ethics of Individuals' Greenhouse Gas Emission*

Tuesday, 9 March 2021, 2:15 p.m.

Due to the precautions imposed by the current Corona pandemic, the Thunberg Hall will be closed to the public until further notice.

You are therefore invited to join the seminar via Zoom instead:  
<https://uu-se.zoom.us/j/62228704568>

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## ABOUT H. ORRI STEFÁNSSON

Orri Stefánsson did his undergraduate studies in philosophy and economics at the University of Iceland and Technische Universität Berlin. After graduating in 2007, he worked as a journalist for a couple of years, after which he moved to London to do an MSc in Philosophy and Public Policy and a PhD in Philosophy, both at the London School of Economics and Political Science. After completing his doctoral studies in 2014, he was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at FMSH in Paris, where he was associated with the Chair for Welfare Economics and Social Justice and the Franco–Swedish Program for Philosophy and Economics. After that, he took up a position as a Researcher at the Institute for Futures Studies in Stockholm, and then an Assistant Professorship at the University of Copenhagen. Since 2019 he is a Pro Futura Scientia Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study and Stockholm University. He is also associate editor of *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*.

Stefánsson works mainly on decision theory, ethics, and the philosophy of risk. He has published both in interdisciplinary journals, such as *Risk Analysis* and *Economics and Philosophy*, as well as in leading philosophy journals, such as *Mind*, *Philosophy of Science* and *AJP*. He is currently writing (with Katie Steele) a book entitled *Beyond Uncertainty: Reasoning with Unknown Possibilities*, which will be published by Cambridge University Press. Stefánsson's current research mostly concerns how one should choose in situations of severe uncertainty, including in situations where one suspects that the outcomes of one's actions (or inaction) could be catastrophic.

Stefánsson's Pro Futura Scientia project is entitled *Decision-Making at the Extremes: Environmental Catastrophes and Radical Uncertainty*.

## ABSTRACT

Within climate ethics, there is a debate about what moral duties and responsibilities we as private individuals have when it comes to the climate crisis. All parties to this debate agree that states—in particular, large and powerful states—are morally responsible for climate change and have a duty to reduce the harm of climate change. But some nevertheless argue that private actions that cause greenhouse gas emission—e.g., our consumption and modes of transportation—have no chance of affecting the severity of climate change. Therefore, they think, individuals are not, through their private actions, morally responsible for climate change, nor does the harm of climate change impose a duty on them to change their consumption and modes of transportation. Others argue that while individuals' private decisions have no chance of *preventing* the climate crisis, such decisions do have some—perhaps small—chance of affecting the *harm* of climate change; which can translate into a large *expected harm* or benefit. Moreover, the people on whom we impose an expected harm when go for a Sunday ride in a gas guzzling SUV, say, have a right not to be harmed, and, in addition, we could avoid imposing the harm at little cost to ourselves. Hence, some argue, the expected harm in question is *unjust*.

In this talk I shall briefly review this debate, and add some further arguments for the view that even seemingly insignificant acts such as going for a Sunday ride on a gas guzzling SUV imposes *unjust expected climate harm*. This view seems to put most of us in an uncomfortable position. However, some have argued that, even if this view is true, we can continue our greenhouse gas emitting lifestyles, without doing any injustice, as long as we *offset* all greenhouse gas emission that we cause. I conclude my talk by arguing that, unfortunately, that is not true. When we cause emission that we offset, the emission will almost certainly impose expected harm on some people while reducing the expected harm on *other* people. Therefore, just as we typically cannot justify harming one person by preventing another person from being harm, we cannot fully justify our greenhouse gas emission by offsetting it. So, although you should offset all your emissions, that does not fully get you off the moral hook.