

Editor's Overview: A Special Issue on "Risk and Responsibility"

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It is no novelty to couple together risk and responsibility as scientific themes for joint reflection.¹ What we have attempted to do in this Special Issue is primarily to investigate these two issues as categories, that is, as philosophical concepts that require clear-cut definitions as a starting point for examining their intertwinement and any ultimate shifts in their meanings under new circumstances such as the emergence of 'technological risks' or 'global challenges'.

This intent has motivated a shift in the main role among disciplines: here political philosophy, ethics and philosophy of science are given the leading role in debating risk, whereas elsewhere this is given to decision theory, sociology (of risk) and political science, the latter represented in this issue by just one paper, that of Turnheim and Tezcan. This shift is, however, not just brought about by the disciplinary affiliation of this guest editor nor by a chance mix of authors. Its rationale lies rather *in re ipsa*, in the growing request for philosophical elaboration on themes that used to be confined to social or even hard sciences. There are two reasons for this: first, the amount of possible harm contained in technological development as a whole (global warming) or in its most lethal chapter (nuclear weapons) raises ultimate problems of life and death, well-being and extreme misery for the whole of humankind that can typically only be grasped by philosophy (ethics, metaphysics) or theology. Second comes a need currently emerging in public discourse about global risks or threats: as long as the reasoning about them took place in epistemic communities (for example of climatologists or public health specialists) or ecological advocacy groups, attitudes of scepticism or confusion rarely arose, and nearly every partner to the conversation was

¹ See for example the article by Giddens quoted in my paper. Further reference to previous works and positions is also to be found in other papers in this Special Issue.

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convinced of the need to raise full awareness of the risks and to take action. This is no longer the case since the entry of an issue such as global warming in the public discourse at national and world-wide level, where a lack of clarity, dissenting opinions or biases generated by special interests (the coal industry in the USA being a case in point) are widespread. Also, while more cost and benefit calculations are now being made publicly about a serious emissions cut (either through a cap and trade system or a carbon tax), what the public seems to be sensitive to is not just economic expediency, but also the fate of the earth and future generations. Hence, a more and more complex public discourse about global threats implies a role for philosophy, as does the necessity to motivate views that used to be self-evident to narrow and specialized audiences.

Having said something about the intention of this Special Issue, I do not think comments or criticism of the chapters are what is required from the editor—at least in this case. I have also refrained from writing a Conclusion because I deem it more fruitful for the reader to look at the plurality of positions, vocabularies and research interests expressed by the authors rather than come to a somehow unifying conclusion. Everyone will pick out the stimuli emanating from this plurality that is most relevant to themselves.

What I will try to do in the following is rather to signal five foci in the articles that compose this issue:

- (1) What links are there between risk and responsibility?
 - (2) What novelties are highlighted by the authors?
 - (3) Definitions and the history of ‘risk’.
 - (4) Why act responsibly?
 - (5) How can we act thus?
- (1) Not all of the authors problematize the linkage between risk and responsibility, and those who do so give different versions of it. Pellizzoni sticks to the classical notion of responsibility as imputability and sees responsibility as structurally coupled with risk taking. Pulcini looks at the emergence of global risks such as nuclear war as the factor that redefines responsibility as an attitude towards others rather than the imputability of a certain type of behaviour to an actor. In my contribution only risks that can be managed by humans are seen as capable of being a source of responsibility, which is regarded as feeling responsible for something and towards somebody; this is not the only limit I set to the scope and meaning of ‘risk’.
 - (2) Many authors converge in underlining that the magnitude of the new risks, particularly in the environmental realm, and more precisely the new magnitude (disruption of world society or even civilization) of the eventual loss, creates new settings for reflection on responsibility. Jamieson sees the difficulties of interpreting climate change as a problem of individual moral responsibility, but concludes that particularly with an eye to this problem it is the very ‘everyday understandings’ of moral responsibility that should be changed. That the new situation requires a redefinition of our moral categories is a position largely shared by Pulcini, as we have just seen.

On other terrains, other authors point out the effects of these new elements. Ferretti argues that in the case of risks of a possibly catastrophic dimension and affecting different generations, the compensation model based on tort law can no longer apply. Pellizzoni points at the epistemological novelty of risks which, due to their very radical nature, cannot be assessed by the usual scientific procedure of trial and error.

- (3) Most authors adhere to the classical definition of risk as what combines the possibility of harm or loss with the probability that it will actually happen. Many authors also cite the distinction between risk and uncertainty, but only in my contribution is this distinction taken as narrowly as to exclude extreme events such as nuclear war or catastrophic climate change from the category of risk. Pellizzoni, on the contrary, regards uncertainty as a special case of risk. With regard to climate change, Jamieson distinguishes between the risks represented by a large, but still linear change and an even larger, non-linear change.

As uncertainties in forecasting future phenomena are sometimes taken as grounds for not taking action to contain them, it is particularly important that Dalla Chiara makes evident how much 'uncertainty' contemporary science contains as a fundamental and, so to speak, physiological category. This is done by reference to quantum mechanics along with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the emergence of 'fuzzy thinking' in logics.

Further controversy is met in the historical assessment of the risk category. All those who tackle this issue converge in seeing risk as feature of modernity, but Ferretti and Cerutti underline the progressive side of risk taking as a widening of choice and therefore of liberty, while Pellizzoni tends to view this stance as a manifestation of neo-liberal ideology.

- (4) As for the reasons justifying the acceptance of responsibility for major risks or threats impending on humankind, both Jamieson and Cerutti concur in maintaining the insufficiency of what Jamieson calls 'prudential responsibility', based on the self-interest of the present generations. While Jamieson resorts to respect for nature as the ultimate reason for assuming responsibility for climate change, in my contribution the argument is based on an obligation towards human generations of the distant future. Pulcini's reasons are teleological rather than normative: acting out of responsibility for 'global risks', as mentioned *sub* 1), is the only way out of the 'pathologies of the global age'.
- (5) There are a wealth of proposals as to how to implement our responsibility towards the risks and threats that impend over human life. Some authors put at the centre the redressing of the unjust distribution of risk and harm, whose geography however—Jamieson warns—is shaped by the social divide (poverty, high levels of inequality, poor public services) within rather than between countries. Perhaps surprisingly, more participation is not seen as a significant factor in combating injustice: Ferretti claims the superiority of distributive justice itself, while Pellizzoni argues that the problem is the need

to democratize society rather than science and knowledge. Outside the justice paradigm, Pulcini points at the importance of new sentiments capable of letting us feel the new severity of the human condition under global risks, while I argue that the survival of humankind is the primary problem in the context of which considerations of fairness make sense.

The Special Issue closes with Turnheim and Tezcan's analysis of a case in point, that is, the functioning of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change seen as an instance of complex governance defined by the relationship with science, an inbuilt reflexivity and forms of governmentality.

Obviously the papers in this issue contain more than I can possibly summarize in this introduction, whose goal is to give a sense of the variety of positions and approaches. As for the latter, I wish to stress the attempt made here to give a joint voice to philosophical positions as different as the normative ethics relating to the theory of justice and the moral and political philosophy concerned with the fate of modernity. This multiplicity is intended to provide a variety of stimuli to those who are open to them, not to generate an unlikely synthesis.

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