

My Research Life

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My research focuses on ethics. In line with so called “experimental philosophy”, I approach this subject in an empirical manner, i.e., I attempt to inform questions about the rightness and wrongness of actions by scientific studies.

In my JSPS project (October 2021 – October 2022) I apply this methodology to the concept of basic needs. In their theories ethicists regularly appeal to this concept. For example, they argue that our first duty of justice is to make sure that everybody is able to meet their basic needs or that universal human rights can be justified in terms of basic needs. But what are basic needs? What do we mean when we talk about them?

To illuminate this question, I conducted a series of psychological studies on people’s understanding of this concept. I asked them what they associate with basic needs, what they think are good examples of them, what is required for a thing to count as a basic need, and so on. It is possible that people’s understanding of basic needs varies across cultures. Thus, following initial research in the United States and the United Kingdom, I also investigated the conceptual intuitions of members of other cultures, including Japan (with the help of my host Professor Takayuki Suzuki), Brazil, Germany, and Indonesia.

At the moment my colleagues and I are in the process of analyzing this cross-cultural data. As to English speakers, my main finding was that many of them understand the concept of basic needs in a somewhat different way than ethicists. They in particular do not seem to regard these needs as objective and universal. Moreover, the concept’s application does not appear to be guided by abstract rules. When a person attempts to decide whether a thing is a basic need they rather check whether this thing is sufficiently similar to stored “prototypes” or “exemplars” (e.g., to food, water, and shelter).

I am extremely grateful to the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for giving me the opportunity to conduct this research. For their great support I would also like to thank Professor Suzuki as well as the University of Tokyo and its Department of the History and

Philosophy of Science. Hopefully, my research contributes to a better understanding of basic needs. It also relates to a project that I am engaged with at the University of Graz. In this project my colleagues and I are interested in what measures against climate change ought to be taken on the assumption that basic needs provision is our first duty of justice towards future generations.

More information on my research can be found on my website: www.thomaspoelzler.com. Finally, I would like to stress that I also very much enjoyed my stay in Japan on a personal level. During my fellowship I took the opportunity to explore the country all the way from Sapporo to Kagoshima. Besides beauty in nature and cultural heritage, I have grown particularly fond of the Japanese mentality and way of life, and hence hope to be able to come back someday soon.