"No harm done? An experimental examination of moral norms for future generations"

Moderator: Dr Patrick Smith
Thursday, 19th Apr 2018
2.00pm to 3.30pm
PS Staff Meeting Room, AS1, #04-01
National University of Singapore

ALL ARE WELCOME!

ABSTRACT
Over a long enough time frame, large-scale policy choices, such as those concerning climate change mitigation and adaptation, are able to change which future population comes into existence, which in turn changes which resulting population incurs various costs and benefits of such choices. Call these “identity-affecting” choices. In this series of behavioral economic studies, we examine the extent to which the public’s behavior and moral reasoning might change when faced with identity-affecting choice problems. First, we ran a novel variant of the well-known Dictator Game in which different chosen transfers would go to distinct and predetermined players in the second group (i.e. each member of the second player group could only get a predetermined amount and would receive it only if that transfer amount was chosen by the Dictator). We found that subjects were unfortunately much less willing to make altruistic sacrifices when making such identity-affecting choices. We then ran variants of the Dictator Game designed to examine whether utilitarian norms might counteract these problematic tendencies (i.e. where the total collective bonus is maximized at fair splits and marginally decreases as selfishness increases). Although we found that utilitarian norms do tend to make subjects more altruistic, this beneficial effect was similarly erased in an identity-affecting variant of the game. If the behavior suggested here is robust and also scales up to the level of policy choice, this seems to leave us in the precarious position of simply hoping the public never grasps the identity-affecting nature of certain policy choices.

BIO
Matt is currently an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences at Australian National University. He is an empirically-oriented philosopher who works on issues at the intersection of philosophy of science, social epistemology, social choice and applied ethics. His central project aims to devise a set of strategies to help diverse groups of problem solvers make more effective judgements and decisions. He also has research interests in scientific reasoning, rationality, cooperation, collective action, collective responsibility, the nature of evidence, and individual decision making under risk and uncertainty. He has broad interdisciplinary training and has been involved with interdisciplinary centres or departments at Virginia Tech, University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Colorado-Boulder and Northwestern University.