

Normative Energy Ethics

Lecture Series



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Bringing Care Ethics and Energy Ethics Together: Vulnerability, Attachment and Narrative

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Interest in energy ethics has grown in recent years in the wake of declarations of 'climate emergencies' and concerns about the justice implications of making a transition from centralized, fossil-fuel based energy systems to more decentralized ones based more on distributed renewable energy. Determining what conceptual resources energy ethics should base itself on raises difficult questions, however. A concern with distributive justice faces the difficulty, for example, that energy itself is not a proper object of justice; the extent to which people have effective access to energy services and the infrastructures that help provide them is crucial. Attempting to base energy ethics on quantitative approaches which focus solely on some objective distribution of energy will therefore run immediately into difficulties. As with environmental justice, questions about the basis of an ethics of energy therefore go beyond questions of distribution, into questions of procedural or recognition justice. Determining what kinds of energy services and how to distribute them requires that those who have particular needs should be able to

represent their own needs. This is particularly those whose position in society creates particular vulnerabilities (such as disabled people or BAME communities) may have needs above and beyond those which are traditionally made more visible by the assessment frameworks used by energy system actors.

Questions thus arise about how a universal and normatively compelling basis for energy ethics (such as a defence of rights to specific energy services) can also incorporate the diversity of needs which characterizes people's dependence on energy services - all without falling into subjectivism. Frameworks based on some version of the capability approach to social justice have therefore become influential in energy ethics as ways of providing such a basis. However, the question of how capabilities should be identified therefore arises, with the risk of repeating a collapse into subjectivism.

In this talk, I want to examine the usefulness of care ethics for understanding the ethical significance of energy in more detail. In doing so, I want to emphasize three aspects of care which require an interpretation of care somewhat at odds with Fisher and Tronto's definition of care and recent interpretations of it.

These are 1) care as enjoining actors to take specific responsibility for the vulnerability of others; 2) attachment as a basis for interdependence additional to material dependence; 3) narrative as the basis of care-based ethical reasoning.

All these aspects require us to revisit older threads within care ethics, as well as to think about its relationship to related philosophical traditions. Exploring them may help establish a normatively (and psychologically) compelling basis for energy ethics, as well as contextualizing understandings of need, capability and rights-based entitlements to energy services.

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