

## Individual Justification and Uncertainty in Public Health Ethics

In part due to the Covid pandemic, there is increasing academic and public interest in public health ethics. However, public health ethics as a distinct field is relatively young, and many significant questions remain unresolved. One of the major unanswered questions in this area is how we should approach ethical questions involving risk and uncertainty. Public health genomics, screening programs, mass vaccination, and many other public health activities are all often understood in terms of risk management. Historically, consequentialist frameworks have been the most popular way to resolve ethical questions involving risk and uncertainty in public health ethics. However, such frameworks also have some significant shortcomings, particularly related to concerns over interpersonal aggregation. In response to such concerns, there has been a resurgence in interest in alternative approaches. Within the philosophical literature, *contractualism* has become increasingly popular as a way to address questions of risk and uncertainty in public health. The centerpiece of contractualism is the process of *individual justification*, which aims to find answers to ethical questions that no individual could reasonably reject. Such a process has strong philosophical and ethical reasons to support it, but it is also supported by empirical research on what motivates individual compliance with public health programs. As such, this focus on justifying public health policies to individuals as separate and distinct individuals represents an attractive alternative approach to ethical decision making in this area.

However, there are still fundamental questions about how this process functions in conditions of risk and uncertainty. These unresolved questions stand in the way of developing contractualism as a successful non-consequentialist framework for public health ethics. In this project, I aim to answer a couple of these fundamental questions about this process of individual justification. Specifically, I aim (1) to assess the relationship between individual justification and interpretations of risk, uncertainty, and probability, with a particular focus on what this means for the status and role of individual justification in public health ethics; and (2) to analyze the impact of heuristics and biases on individual justification, and the ethical consequences of such heuristics and biases, again with a particular focus on what this means for the status and role of individual justification in public health ethics. I aim to argue that the most appropriate conception of probability in this context is epistemic, meaning that probabilities describe our beliefs about the likelihood of outcomes. I also will argue that such a focus on epistemic approaches requires particular and substantial attention to the role of heuristics and biases in individual justification. The overall upshot of this project is to remove some significant barriers blocking the development of an effective non-consequentialist alternative to ethical decision-making under conditions of risk and uncertainty in public health.