The Polluter Pays Principle

In the literature on climate justice, as well as in climate policy circles, the Polluter Pays Principle (PPP) often serves as a starting point for normative investigations into how the burdens of combatting climate change should be distributed. Though the PPP could be interpreted as a forward-looking principle that merely seeks to ensure that polluters have an incentive to stop polluting, on most accounts it is (also) a principle of corrective justice, embodying the claim that it is *just* that those who have wronged others rectify the wrong. However, despite this broad agreement on its normative status, I believe that this principle has not been adequately worked out, nor is it clear what implications it has in a number of areas. In my presentation, I will briefly go through a set of questions that are in need of further analysis and which I will work on in the coming years. First, should we define ‘pollution’ on the production side or consumption side of emissions? Second, is the PPP a proportionality based principle such that polluters are only required to shoulder a share of the total climate burden that is proportional to their contribution to the total sum of morally wrongful emissions, or may some polluters be asked to ‘take up the slack’ for other polluters, that is, shoulder climate burdens in disproportion to their contribution to the total sum of morally wrongful emissions? If the latter, we can resist the received wisdom that the PPP must be complemented by other principles of corrective justice the Beneficiary Pays Principle or distributive principles like the Ability to Pay Principle. Third, the PPP is typically taken to require drawing a moralized line between permissible emissions and morally wrongful pollution. But where do we draw that line more exactly, and how does it relate to the overall carbon budget? For example, do people have a right to emit so-called subsistence emissions even though doing so is inconsistent with avoiding very dangerous climate change? Fourth, how does the right to emit relate to population growth?