

Beyond Myth Busting: How Engagement with Ethical Dilemmas Can Improve Debates and Policymaking on Migration

Lukas Schmid , Martin Ruhs , Rainer Bauböck , and Julia Mourão Permoser 

Policymaking always involves hard choices. Sometimes policymakers must weigh conflicting political goals; sometimes they must choose between different means to achieve a certain goal; and sometimes they must consider their own preferences against electoral pressures. These are well-known trade-offs that occur in any policy field on a regular basis. In some circumstances, however, policymakers may also be confronted with what we consider to be “hard moral dilemmas.”¹ Hard moral dilemmas involve conflicts between two moral goals that cannot be fully resolved: neither goal is clearly morally weightier than the other, and so whichever policy option is chosen something of high moral value must be sacrificed. Dealing with such dilemmas is not easy, neither academically nor politically. At the same time, we think that failing to recognize or actively avoiding such dilemmas is deeply problematic, as this can lead to incomplete or

Lukas Schmid, Goethe University Frankfurt, Frankfurt, Germany (L.Schmid@jur.uni-frankfurt.de)

Martin Ruhs, European University Institute, Florence, Italy (martin.ruhs@eui.eu)

Rainer Bauböck, European University Institute, Florence, Italy (rainer.baubock@eui.eu)

Julia Mourão Permoser, University for Continuing Education Krems, Krems an der Donau, Austria (julia.mourao-permoser@donau-uni.ac.at)

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unsubstantiated normative analyses and understandings, as well as to unnecessary polarization of public debates and policymaking.

A few years ago, we developed a new collaborative research agenda, the “ethics of migration policy dilemmas” (or “Dilemmas,” for short),² as part of the joint Dilemmas initiative created by the Migration Policy Centre and the Migration as Morality Politics research project. Our goal was to investigate such hard ethical dilemmas as they arise in the field of migration policymaking. While it is clear to us that, in current times, much headline-catching migration policy is crude, crass, and clearly morally condemnable, this is not true for all migration policies across time and space. Overall, migration is a field of regulation in which bombastic rhetoric often gives way to less radical and more pragmatic legislation.³ Indeed, migration policymaking standardly involves the resolution of complex tensions between competing but, at least *prima facie*, equally legitimate moral claims. Consider, for example, the case of temporary labor migration programs that, however designed, involve a deep tension between domestic and global justice.⁴ Alternatively, consider regularization programs, where justice claims must be balanced against the necessity to uphold key features of the rule of law.

In light of this, the aim of the Dilemmas agenda is twofold: first, to find out—based on existing empirical studies—*which* issues pose true ethical dilemmas that cannot be easily resolved and are not just a product of political ideology or feasibility constraints; and second, to analyze these dilemmas theoretically, from the perspective of normative political philosophy, providing action-guiding input useful to policymakers and other stakeholders in the field. We believe that these two goals are interconnected. The first one requires studying the contexts of migration policymaking and cannot be met through pure armchair reflection by theorists; the second requires going beyond the descriptive and explanatory goals of the social sciences and looking at normative conflicts through the lens of analytical normative theory.

The point of pursuing this research agenda is to counter the tendency to search for easy but overly simplified solutions to the complex challenges arising in domestic, inter-, and transnational contexts of border and migration governance. In other words, Dilemmas aims to explore and—if possible—reduce moral complexity, rather than conjure it away. By investigating the deep moral tensions that underpin policy decisions, Dilemmas wants to show policy actors that research has more to offer than the deliverance of scientific facts, and to show migration scholars that engaging with policy questions need not contaminate the academic study of migration but may actually help to better understand migration dynamics that are

profoundly shaped by policy choices. Ultimately, the Dilemmas approach hopes to offer a way out of excessive polarization in migration policy debates by promoting the insight that these debates can sometimes involve conflicting values of equal importance, which may stimulate productive dialogue and debate.

A number of authors from different academic disciplines and the policymaking world have already heeded this call, producing a growing body of work that unearths and critically discusses the hard ethical dilemmas involved in questions pertaining to the treatment and rights of unauthorized immigrants and rejected asylum seekers;⁵ the regulation of emigration;⁶ international labor migration;⁷ international cooperation in refugee protection;⁸ search and rescue at sea;⁹ and anti-immigrant backlash.¹⁰ In the present roundtable, we seek to take one step back from such concrete dilemmas, inviting philosophers, political scientists, and policy actors to reflect critically on more general questions about the potential offered by a Dilemmas approach. While our research program has exposed and discussed key moral dilemmas, it has not yet systematically grappled with further questions about the implications of dilemmatic phenomena, or their uptake by different kinds of actors. For instance, can a Dilemmas approach point normative political philosophers toward broader, untouched moral problems likely to become salient in the future? Can Dilemmas help make explanatory sense of confusing and seemingly contradictory policy developments? On the question of uptake, are there generalizable guidelines for action that policymakers can rely on when facing hard moral dilemmas that are not easily mitigated? How can we improve the chances for the Dilemmas perspective to find resonance with decision-makers? And what are the potential limitations of the Dilemmas approach?

It is these types of questions that this roundtable's contributions will illuminate. However, before introducing the relevant individual essays, we will discuss briefly how the Dilemmas approach contrasts with other contemporary views of the relation between academic scholarship and migration policymaking. In the next section, we engage with one such approach that is frequently described as "busting" or "debunking" migration "myths" (henceforth, "myth busting"). This approach involves the use of research evidence and scientific facts to debunk allegedly false beliefs and ideas held by the public and policy actors, in the hope that better awareness of facts and context will lead the public to demand, and policy actors to design and implement, "better" policies.¹¹ While it is obvious that rigorous research can play an important role in debunking false beliefs and ideas about the characteristics, drivers, and effects of migration, it is equally true that the interpretation of facts in the social sciences is often controversial and that public attitudes and

policymaking processes are not—indeed, cannot be—shaped only by scientific interpretation of relevant empirical facts and contexts. The formation of policy preferences and actual policies is necessarily driven by a range of factors, such as interests, institutions, people’s understandings of the world around them (including cause-effect relationships), and, crucially for the Dilemmas approach, their normative beliefs about desirable policy goals and means. Making sense of and improving migration debates and policymaking thus always requires sensitivity to the conflicting normative pressures that even the best-informed policy actors face.

WHY MYTH BUSTING IS NOT ENOUGH—AND IS SOMETIMES MISLEADING

Social scientists have produced a rapidly growing body of research and knowledge about the causes, effects, and contextual circumstances of migration and migration policies. Naturally, the strength and reliability of this evidence is greater in some areas than in others. For example, we have relatively strong evidence, based on a wide range of studies across different countries and using different methods, that the overall fiscal effects of migrants on the host country are rather small when measured against a country’s GDP.¹² This evidence can and has been used to challenge the popular claim that “migrants are a big burden on the welfare state.” Crucially, the available evidence on the fiscal effects of migrants does *not* mean that immigration does not challenge and potentially even threaten welfare regimes in different ways (for instance, by raising questions among the host country population about the fairness of migrants’ access to welfare benefits), but it does clarify the specific question of the balance of migrants’ costs and benefits for public finance. This is an example where research has played an important role in debunking a popular myth. Migration myth busting so conceived strikes us as an important exercise of critical social engagement. It aims at the education of citizens and policy actors, and understands that such education must include the debunking of influential lies and false narratives spun by powerful actors out of ignorance, misperception, or self-interest.

Myth busting can become more problematic and potentially misleading, however, if its claims go beyond a comprehensive, reasonable, and fair assessment and interpretation of the available evidence or, worse, if it overstates the extent to which there *are* clear, evidence-based, and generalizable answers to intricate and

inherently normative migration policy questions. For example, in debates about labor migration, it is often claimed that a given country does not need more migrants in particular sectors or, conversely, that it needs more in order to fill labor and skills shortages that local workers cannot or will not. Presenting and debunking both these claims on the basis of scientific evidence alone¹³ is misleading because it obscures the important interests and normative considerations that inevitably underpin debates and policy decisions on the role of migrants in meeting perceived shortages and labor needs. There is no universal agreement on how to define and measure a “labor shortage” or “skills needs,” and there can be various alternatives to immigration as a policy response.¹⁴ For example, whether the best response to a shortage of healthcare workers is more migrants, more technology, higher wages to attract more local workers, or a combination of the three is a question that will also be influenced by determining whose interests should be prioritized. A generalized myth-busting approach cannot answer the nuanced and inherently normative questions about the role that migrants *should* play in reducing shortages in particular sectors and occupations. The broader point here is that myth busting can become problematic when it tells an incomplete story about the considerations and effects relevant to a given policy decision but is still used to make particular policy recommendations.

In this context, it is important to remember that democratic conditions render the perceived legitimacy of public policies dependent on their backing by a wide-enough political consensus, and the coalitions necessary to craft such consensus often assemble actors with widely differing and conflicting value commitments. The only legitimate policy outcome might then be one in which all partners can recognize at least some of their own and their constituents’ value commitments. Thus, relying exclusively on myth busting to engage with public policy debates risks ignoring the understanding that migration policymaking in liberal democracies has to face moral dilemmas that cannot be easily resolved through empirical facts, although knowledge of the relevant facts (if they exist) will be essential for any defensible policy response. From the perspective of political actors, such dilemmas also cannot be resolved through philosophical reflection alone, although encouraging such reflection will again be important for normatively defensible public policy choices.

Many—but certainly not all—such dilemmas can be traced back to the inherent tension between liberal commitments to universal values and human rights and the necessarily particularistic pursuit of the common interests of a country’s citizens

and residents to the neglect of outsiders. Migration policy is a field that straddles and challenges the boundaries between domestic and global justice perspectives. Because international migration connects sovereign states through persons with membership claims in countries of origin and destination, its regulation creates conflicts between the distinct interests of source and receiving countries as well as those of migrants themselves. Policy actors (including organizations that represent migrants' interests) normally have a mandate to prioritize one of these interests over the others. From an impartial normative perspective, however, these interests need to be balanced and reconciled with each other. Even if this were possible in principle, policymakers who are committed to finding solutions acceptable to all parties but are accountable to the citizens of only one country will find themselves caught in a dilemma between their particularistic mandate and ethical demands to factor in how their decisions will impact all the countries involved and the migrants that move between them.

For all these reasons, we believe that it is important to recognize the limits of myth busting and to avoid obscuring and crowding out important debates about conflicting moral goals in policymaking. Indeed, greater recognition of the wide range of factors that influence policymaking, and especially of the dilemmatic nature of some policy issues, can help us understand better the impact, or lack of it, that social science research has had on migration policymaking around the world. Researchers frequently complain that policymakers seem to dismiss what social scientists tell them about the background assumptions behind, or effects of, their actions, instead endorsing policies that appear blatantly to contradict the best available evidence. This lack of impact has become profoundly distressing for many researchers, to the extent that theorizing about the informational, communicational, and institutional logics behind such resistance to facts is becoming its own field of inquiry.¹⁵ Common explanations of policy actors' failure to respond adequately to evidence include lack of knowledge, misunderstanding of available evidence, cognitive factors and biases in individuals' processing of, and responses to, new data and research,¹⁶ and distortion of reality for personal or institutional gain. As a result, some researchers now advocate that scholars keep their distance from policymakers and instead develop strategies to directly communicate with citizens to change minds and challenge presumptions on the basis of appealingly packaged hard evidence.¹⁷ The underlying idea is that an educated and engaged citizenry is necessary to change the incentives that make policymakers resist and twist facts and evidence. The Dilemmas approach

cautions against fully adopting such a limited understanding of the politics of migration policymaking.

THE DILEMMAS PERSPECTIVE: WHAT IMPACT DOES IT HAVE ON PHILOSOPHY, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND POLICY?

While we do not dispute that some policy actors' behavior and decisions are based on knowledge gaps, misunderstandings, and self-interested distortions, we also urge sensitivity toward those policy actors who are well informed and intent on doing right, but grapple with difficult ethical dilemmas. At this point, one could object that ethical dilemmas, characterized as tensions that are experienced by policymakers "intent on doing right," are likely to affect only a few individuals. In fact, however, the consideration of ethical dilemmas is not just a moral burden that some conscientious policymakers impose on themselves; it is also embedded in and supported by societal institutions and norms in liberal democracies. The salience of normative dilemmas for migration policymaking can result from institutions and organizations prompting individuals to consider ethical dilemmas as part of fulfilling their institutional roles. Most obviously, such strong normative commitments are built into the oaths taken by judges, which reflect the expectation placed on their professional ethics that they should weigh evidence impartially rather than from a self-interested perspective of enhancing their own power or the interests of a particular party involved in the case. If a case brought to court raises a hard moral dilemma, judges should be able to address it in their reasoning. Where they can no longer be trusted to do so because of corruption or political capture, the role of the judiciary in a democratic division of powers is seriously undermined.

For policymakers, it may be less obvious that they are bound by institutionalized normative commitments, but these are still present in the task descriptions of members of legislative assemblies and those who hold high executive offices, and are sometimes also expressed in the oaths they take. Nongovernmental organizations promoting migration policies often also adopt goals that commit their staff to certain ethical values. It is therefore sociologically plausible to assume that many policy actors, regardless of their personal moral convictions, will experience certain policy decisions as ethical dilemmas from the perspective of the institutional and political role they play. Clarifying the empirical basis of these dilemmas and offering normative analyses of potential ways of mitigating them may also enhance the impact of migration research on public debates and policymaking.

Of course, the Dilemmas perspective is not a silver bullet, neither for enhancing the impact of migration research nor for resolving the complex challenges involved in understanding the global migration policy landscape. To be clear, many migration policy questions do *not* involve hard ethical dilemmas as we understand them, neither from the perspective of the policymakers themselves nor from the point of view of the normative analyst. Trumpian pretenses to deport millions of unauthorized immigrants, for example, are not likely to be based on careful consideration of moral dilemmas concerning unauthorized residence, but rather on the political goal of dismantling institutionalized ethical constraints on migration policy. In this sense, it is dangerous to overstretch the idea of Dilemmas, as doing so is as likely to obscure and distort moral and political realities as ignoring the existence of hard ethical dilemmas and their manifestation in migration policies in the first place.

Other important questions about the potential and implications of the Dilemmas perspective are less obvious but are considered in the contributions to this roundtable. These contributions explore questions relating to two different aspects of Dilemmas thinking. The first set of questions regards the wider potential of unearthing and analyzing hard ethical dilemmas in migration policymaking: Can doing so help reveal and clarify neglected moral problems and political developments of more general and broader normative and practical importance? Changing perspectives, the second set of questions considers policymakers as the addressees of Dilemmas analyses: What are the best available strategies to increase policymakers' sensitivity to hard moral dilemmas in policymaking, and are there generalizable normative guidelines to help them respond to such dilemmas?

In his contribution to the first set of questions, Michael Blake considers the hard moral dilemma involved in liberal-democratic institutional responses to (likely) future climate migrations, concluding that the possible set of responses to this dilemma itself reveals a deep and hitherto neglected problem of intergenerational injustice. Blake argues that all morally defensible responses to the dilemmas of large-scale climate migration are likely to require future generations to be better builders and caretakers of liberal-democratic society and its institutions than current and previous generations have had to be. Thus, consideration of a hard dilemma here reveals a neglected-yet-profound philosophical question: how are we to understand and address the injustices of forcing future generations to deal with pernicious choices and develop Herculean society-building capacities?

Dietrich Thränhardt's essay, also elaborating on the way in which a Dilemmas perspective can clarify and contextualize large-scale sociopolitical challenges,

focuses on explicating enduring structural tensions between universalist and particularist moral goals by casting the political complexities of refugee accommodation in terms of a “hospitality dilemma.” Viewing conflicts about refuge and integration through the lens of the hospitality dilemma shifts the perspective to a bird’s-eye view of broader structural tensions, allowing us to better understand how changes in specific regulatory regimes express long-term developments in the underlying competition between particularist and universalist imperatives. Ultimately, Thränhardt argues that successful mitigation of the hospitality dilemma requires empowered civil societies that facilitate the free interaction of settled residents and newcomers.

The other two essays respond to the more immediate and concrete questions of how the Dilemmas perspective may be introduced into policymaking processes and what general guidelines for action might be available for sensitized policymakers struggling with dilemmatic policy choices. Addressing the first question, Elizabeth Collett’s essay emphasizes that what theorists may identify as hard ethical dilemmas will more often appear to policymakers as political trade-offs demanding complex cost-benefit analyses and the resolution of tensions between competing constituent and stakeholder interests. Zooming into contexts ranging from unexpected crises to different points in political competition cycles, Collett introduces various circumstances in which advocates may more or less successfully move policymakers to consider pertinent moral concerns, though she cautions that whether these are most fruitfully presented in terms of a Dilemmas consideration also depends on the particular context. Collett suggests that a key potential benefit of introducing a Dilemmas perspective, where there are no single-best solutions that avoid any moral or other costs, is that it may provide policymakers with a way to “navigate out of entrenched and polarized approaches” and thus “inspire the courage to take swift action.”¹⁸ Ultimately, however, the essay stresses the complexity of navigating intersecting contexts whose underlying logics produce conflicting incentives for decision-makers, bringing into stark relief the difficulty of elevating political consideration of morally complex questions above more standard cost-benefit analyses.

Finally, Mollie Gerver’s essay offers a set of philosophical guidelines for policymakers and adjacent actors to navigate hard moral dilemmas in migration policymaking. Gerver explores the moral and prudential appropriateness of various decision-making procedures, including overall utility calculations, democratic vote taking, and coin flipping. In so doing, Gerver brings philosophical insights

into the problems of imperfect decision-making to bear on continuous practical challenges in nonideal migration governance, demonstrating that actors facing hard dilemmas need not accept the implication that every possible course of action is inevitably and equally wrongful.

In all, the essays in this roundtable demonstrate that a Dilemmas perspective on migration policymaking—by moving beyond the mere statement of facts toward an emphasis on understanding and mitigating moral trade-offs—has the potential to move forward philosophical and social-scientific debates as well as improve and guide at least some policy decisions fraught with deep moral tension.

NOTES

- ¹ Rainer Bauböck, Julia Mourão Permoser, and Martin Ruhs, “The Ethics of Migration Policy Dilemmas,” *Migration Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2022), pp. 427–41.
- ² See “The Ethics of Migration Policy Dilemmas,” Migration Policy Centre, migrationpolicycentre.eu/the-ethics-of-migration-policy-dilemmas.
- ³ Compare, for instance, Mathias Czaika and Hein De Haas, “The Effectiveness of Immigration Policies,” *Population and Development Review* 39, no. 3 (September 2013), pp. 487–508.
- ⁴ See Rainer Bauböck and Martin Ruhs, “The Elusive Triple Win: Addressing Temporary Labour Migration Dilemmas through Fair Representation,” *Migration Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2022), pp. 528–52.
- ⁵ Sarah Song and Irene Bloemraad, “Immigrant Legalization: A Dilemma between Justice and the Rule of Law,” *Migration Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2022), pp. 484–509; Leila Hadj Abdou and Eszter Kollar, “Why Failed Asylum Seekers Should Have a Conditional Right to Stay: An Ethical Guideline for Policy Debates,” *Comparative Migration Studies* 12, no. 14 (March 2024); Lukas Schmid, “Responding to Unauthorized Residence: On a Dilemma between ‘Firewalls’ and ‘Regularizations,’” *Comparative Migration Studies* 12, no. 22 (April 2024); and Rainer Bauböck, Julia Mourão Permoser, Martin Ruhs, and Lukas Schmid, eds., “Debating Regularisation of Irregular Migrants” (EUI/RSC Working Paper 2024/44, European University Institute, 2024), hdl.handle.net/1814/77429.
- ⁶ Patti Tamara Lenard, “Restricting Emigration for Their Protection? Exit Controls and the Protection of (Women) Migrant Workers,” *Migration Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2022), pp. 510–27; and Rainer Bauböck, Julia Mourão Permoser, Martin Ruhs, and Lukas Schmid, eds., “Debating Restrictions on Emigration” (EUI/RSC Working Paper 2024/45, European University Institute, 2024), cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/77430.
- ⁷ Bauböck and Ruhs, “Elusive Triple Win”; and Rainer Bauböck, Julia Mourão Permoser, Martin Ruhs, and Lukas Schmid, eds., “Debating Temporary Labour Migration Policies” (EUI/RSC Working Paper 2024/47, European University Institute, 2024), cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/77432.
- ⁸ T. Alexander Aleinikoff and David Owen, “Refugee Protection: ‘Here’ or ‘There’?,” *Migration Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2022), pp. 464–83; Rainer Bauböck, Julia Mourão Permoser, Martin Ruhs, and Lukas Schmid, eds., “Debating Refugee Protection ‘Here’ or ‘There’” (Working Paper 2024/49, European University Institute, 2024), cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/77433; and Dimitrios Efthymiou, “Between Meeting Quotas and Following the Duty-Bound Heart: Navigating the Formidable Dilemma of Refugee Protection in the EU,” *Comparative Migration Studies* 12, no. 26 (May 2024).
- ⁹ Itamar Mann and Julia Mourão Permoser, “Floating Sanctuaries: The Ethics of Search and Rescue at Sea,” *Migration Studies* 10, no. 3 (September 2022), pp. 442–63; and Rainer Bauböck, Julia Mourão Permoser, Martin Ruhs, and Lukas Schmid, eds., “Debating Search and Rescue of Migrants at Sea” (EUI/RSC Working Paper 2024/46, European University Institute, 2024), cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/77431.
- ¹⁰ Zsolt Kapelner, “Anti-Immigrant Backlash: The Democratic Dilemma for Immigration Policy,” *Comparative Migration Studies* 12, no. 12 (March 2024).
- ¹¹ See, for instance, Diego Acosta Arcarazo and Anja Wiesbrock, “Global Migration Issues: Myths and Realities,” in Diego Acosta Arcarazo and Anja Wiesbrock, eds., *Global Migration: Old Assumptions, New Dynamics*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2015), pp. 1–28; Alex Nowrasteh, *The Most Common Arguments against Immigration and Why They’re Wrong* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2021), www.libertarianism.org/sites/libertarianism.org/files/2021-04/The%20Most%20Common%20Arguments

[%20Against%20Immigration%20and%20Why%20They%27re%20Wrong.pdf?hsCtaTracking=5b590920-b88a-4641-ba7b-5fdc41e9a266%7Cba17362a-c667-46dd-9170-b112363474e3](#); Hein de Haas, *How Migration Really Works: A Factful Guide to the Most Divisive Issue in Politics* (London: Penguin, 2023); and Ernesto Castañeda and Carina Cione, *Immigration Realities: Challenging Common Misperceptions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024).

- ¹² For the U.K. context, compare Migration Advisory Committee, *EEA Migration in the UK: Final Report* (London: Migration Advisory Committee, September 2018), [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/741926/Final_EEA_report.PDF](#); and Carlos Vargas-Silva, Madeleine Sumption, and Ben Brindle, *Briefing: The Fiscal Impact of Immigration to the UK* (Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, 2024), [migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-Briefing-The-fiscal-impact-of-immigration-to-the-UK.pdf](#).
- ¹³ See, for instance, “Debunking Immigration Myths,” American Action Forum, May 10, 2021, [americanactionforum.org/insight/debunking-immigration-myths/](#).
- ¹⁴ Martin Ruhs and Bridget Anderson, *Who Needs Migrant Workers? Labour Shortages, Immigration, and Public Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- ¹⁵ See, for example, Katharina Natter and Natalie Welfens, “Why Has Migration Research So Little Impact? Examining Knowledge Practices in Migration Policy Making and Migration Studies,” in “International Migration Review at 60: Evolving and Emerging Models of International Migration Research,” special issue, *International Migration Review* 58, no. 4 (December 2024), pp. 1669–1700.
- ¹⁶ See, for example, Andrew Geddes, “Repertoires of Migration Governance in Europe and North America,” in Kiran Banerjee and Craig Damian Smith, eds., *Migration Governance in North America: Policy, Politics, and Community* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2024), pp. 433–53.
- ¹⁷ Hein de Haas, “Changing the Migration Narrative: On the Power of Discourse, Propaganda and Truth Distortion” (Working Paper 181, International Migration Institute, May 2024), [www.migrationinstitute.org/publications/changing-the-migration-narrative-on-the-power-of-discourse-propaganda-and-truth-distortion](#).
- ¹⁸ Elizabeth Collett, “When Can an Ethical-Dilemmas Framing Influence Policy?,” *Ethics & International Affairs*, 39, no. 1 (2025), pp. 62–74, at p. 72.

Abstract: Many aspects of migration policy involve hard moral dilemmas. Whether the dilemmas are concerned with refugee accommodation and integration, temporary labor migration, or the prospects of rejected asylum seekers, policymakers must sometimes make tough choices between competing and equally compelling moral values. Through in-depth discussion of various concrete examples, contributions to this roundtable argue that recognition and systematic analysis of the “ethics of migration policy dilemmas” can both increase philosophical and social-scientific understanding of public debates and policymaking on migration and provide ethical guidance for migration policy. Before introducing the roundtable’s individual contributions, this essay argues for the distinct epistemic value of the Dilemmas perspective by contrasting it with an approach that emphasizes the “busting” of myths; that is, the empirical uncovering of influential falsehoods in public and policy debates, often in the hope of improving policymaking through stronger evidence. We argue that while such myth busting can be valuable, it is insufficient and sometimes unhelpful for understanding how migration policy comes about and can be improved. Policymaking is not just shaped by empirical facts and understandings but also by interests and goals, including moral ones, that give empirical considerations deeper meaning and action-guiding potential. Often, these moral goals are numerous, similarly or equally compelling, and in profound tension with one another. Where this is the case, we should not simply introduce more and more accurate factual descriptions; we must also analyze dilemmas.

Keywords: migration policy, moral dilemmas, myth busting, migration studies, impact on policy-making, ethical decision-making