Serge-Christophe Kolm is a prominent member of the French community of ingénieurs-économistes (engineer-economists). Trained in the elite French grandes écoles (great schools), these individuals, motivated by practical problems of the public sector, have made distinguished contributions to the study of normative economics. Kolm, more so than others in this tradition, has had an ongoing interest in the philosophical foundations of normative economics, with the consequence that he has written extensively on social ethics. The essays in this volume have been written to honour Serge Kolm for his seminal research on social ethics and normative economics. In Sect. 1 of this Introduction, we provide a biographical sketch of Kolm’s life and scholarship. In Sect. 2, we provide an overview of the contributions to this collection of essays.

1 Biographical Sketch

Serge Kolm was born in Paris in 1932. He spent his youth living in Paris and, during World War II, on a farm in Gascony south of Bordeaux. Kolm’s early years were dominated by the German occupation of France during the war. By his own admission, this tragic period with its human suffering and lack of freedom left a profound mark on him and played a crucial role in his intellectual development.
Kolm was a brilliant young man. He did extremely well in the highly competitive French education system. A particular feature of French higher education is that it has two kinds of institutions operating in parallel: on one side, there are the universities and, on the other, there are the grandes écoles. The grandes écoles are mainly, but not exclusively, engineering schools. On graduation, most of the best lycéens (high school pupils) continue their studies in selected lycées in order to receive specific training to prepare for the entrance examinations for the grandes écoles. The top-ranked engineering school is the Ecole Polytechnique. Together with the Ecole Normale Supérieure (Higher Normal School), the Ecole Polytechnique is the most sought-after and prestigious institution for post-secondary education in France. Kolm entered the Ecole Polytechnique in 1953. In spite of being an engineering school, courses there are primarily theoretical, with an emphasis on mathematics and the natural sciences.

Many well-known scholars have been associated with the Ecole Polytechnique. At the end of the nineteenth century, Henri Poincaré was a student and subsequently a professor there. Later, while Kolm was a student, Gaston Julia and Paul Lévy both taught mathematics at the Ecole Polytechnique. During that period, the Ecole Polytechnique had a small economics department under the direction of François Divisia. Divisia was a co-founder of the Econometric Society. Divisia and Lévy were Kolm’s advisors for a dissertation on income distribution and redistribution, including an analysis of the effects of transfers on inequality.

After their studies, Polytechniciens (as students of the school are known) join the senior ranks of the French civil service, with the choice of which ministry or other government institution (such as one of the public utilities) they join determined in part on the basis of their rankings in the graduating examinations. Following a year of military service in North Africa, Kolm became a member of the corps des ingénieurs des Ponts et Chaussées (engineering corps of Bridges and Roads), pursuing further applied studies at the Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées (National School of Bridges and Roads). One of his teachers there was René Roy. Some other well-known economists have been ingénieurs des Ponts et Chaussées, such as Jules Dupuit, François Divisia, René Roy, and Pierre Massé.

In 1957, Kolm received his first appointment as a senior civil servant, the Directorship of the Senegal Development Mission. He was in particular responsible for the development of the Senegal river basin, participating in projects dealing with the construction of dams, irrigation, and agricultural experiments. As part of his duties, Kolm and his colleagues made a social and economic survey of the region. In retrospect, some of this work can be seen as an early study of multidimensional inequality. Kolm’s first book in 1959, Les Hommes du Fouta-Toro (Men of the Fouta-Toro), is based on this African experience.

1 As its name suggests, the Ecole Normale Supérieure was founded as an institution for training teachers for secondary schools, not as an engineering school. However, it now provides training in a range of disciplines.

2 Bibliographic details of Kolm’s publications cited in this Introduction may be found in the list of his scientific publications at the end of this volume.