Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich

Program / semester: Environmental Studies Certificate Program (RCC) / 1st semester

Course title: Climate Ethics

Instructor: Dr. Alexander Schulan

Winter term / summer term: winter term 2019/20

Date submitted: 29.02.2020

The moral uselessness of human population control

Name: Yannik Hecher

Student ID number: 10906646

Email: Yannik.Hecher@campus.lmu.de

The moral uselessness of human population control

Climate change and population ethics

Climate change is caused by humans emitting greenhouse gases (GHG) (IPCC, 2019). Today's high-income countries have caused global warming by emitting increasing amounts of GHG since the industrial revolution, and in recent decades the emissions of low-income countries have also strongly increased. Rising sea levels and more common weather extremes will threaten low-income countries especially (IPCC, 2018). The complexity of climate change itself and the difficult choice between mitigation strategies and the spatiotemporal separation between causes and effects make climate change a subject for moral philosophy (Gardiner, 2006).

The main causes of increasing GHG emissions have been the growth of global economies and the growth of the human population (IPCC, 2007). Both these factors should therefore be part of the discussion on reducing GHG emissions. In this essay, however, I will focus only on human population growth, which could be controlled to mitigate climate change (Cafaro, 2012). Population control and all other "[…] actions [which] can affect both *who* is born and *how many* people are (ever) born [are the matter of] 'population ethics'." (Greaves, 2017)

The main question of this essay,

> '*Is it morally acceptable to control the human population in order to mitigate climate change?*'

is a matter of population ethics, and I will answer it as follows:

> '*No, it is immoral to control the human population to mitigate climate change, because those who did not cause climate change would be affected, and population growth is regulating itself*'.

But before starting my argument, I must return to the theory of population ethics.

So far, philosophers have not been able to formulate an unobjectionable normative theory for the human population, as most theories lead to counterintuitive results (Greaves, 2017). Some theories[1] lead to a 'sadistic conclusion:' following them, one would not value additional lives which are worth living but lie underneath a certain quality-of-life-level (Arrhenius et al., 2017; Greaves, 2017).

[1] Theories of population ethics, which I do not explain and that lead to 'sadistic conclusions', but avoid the 'repugnant conclusion' are "averagism", "variable value principles" and "critical level principles"; additionally, I do not explain the "person-affecting view" (Arrhenius, Ryberg, & Tännsjö, 2017; Greaves, 2017).

'Totalists,' who value the product of the average human well-being and the number of individuals, avoid the 'sadistic conclusion,' but many population ethicists nonetheless disagree with totalism (Greaves, 2017).[2] Totalists value an additional life even if it is slightly below the average quality-of-life-level, which ultimately leads to the 'repugnant conclusion' (Parfit, 1986, pp. 381-390). In short, the 'repugnant conclusion' states that a population with a certain number of individuals having a high average well-being ('population A') will gradually become a population with extremely many individuals, having still positive but very low individual levels of well-being and lives hardly worth living ('population Z'). The total well-being in 'population Z' will be larger than the total well-being in 'population A.' Therefore, a totalist would have to argue in favour of many humans living miserably.

The moralities of human population control

Leaving aside other aspects of Parfit's findings and their discussion,[3] I will now reflect on population control and the 'repugnant conclusion' in the light of current demographics.

In 1950, 2.5 billion humans lived on Earth. This number has increased to 7.8 billion in 2020 and will continue increasing to 10.9 billion by 2100 (UN, 2019). The more humans live on Earth, the more food, water, space, and energy will be needed, and therefore the more GHG will be emitted. As resources are limited and humans have to reduce emissions to keep Earth habitable, a simple way to solve these issues is stopping human population growth (Cafaro, 2012).

As already mentioned, climate change threatens low-income countries like small island nations and Asian and sub-Saharan African countries (IPCC, 2018). These countries' populations are rapidly increasing, which negatively affects poverty (UN, 2019). This scenario threatens sub-Saharan Africa, since poverty there is projected to be stable within the next years (IMF, 2020).[4]

Possible ways to control the human population would be to limit reproduction rates or to allow women to bear children only after a certain age. The promotion of contraception, education, the emancipation of women, and other means could also reduce population growth and ultimately cut down emissions (Cafaro, 2012; Kates, 2004). Utilising emancipation to reduce population growth to mitigate climate change is problematic, however, since this logic instrumentalizes the value of emancipation. One might nonetheless argue that emancipation itself can be of intrinsic value (the emancipation of women is by itself valuable) and also instrumental value (reducing the human population to mitigate climate change is valuable).

[2] "Totalism" is a synonym for "total utilitarianism" (compare Arrhenius et al., 2017; Greaves, 2017). The intrinsic value of totalism is the maximization of well-being.
[3] Further readings and citations within Arrhenius et al., 2017; Brennan & Lo, 2016; Cafaro, 2012; Greaves, 2017; Parfit, 1986.
[4] Poverty in the rest of the world will sink to a minimum. For detailed graphics see Roser (2020).

Although this is hard to argue against, this instrumentalization might also result in undesirable climate change scepticism.

Controlling the human population is not as quick and easy as one might think. Climate change has a long history, but its mitigation is a near-term issue. GHG emissions have to be reduced immediately to achieve the 2°C goal and to minimize threats by climate change (IPCC, 2019). Population control could only be a solution over the long-term. Even if fertility rates globally dropped immediately, our population would still grow by two-thirds of the projections, because of the large amount of children and adolescents who will bear children in the next decades (UN, 2019). Effective short-term measures of population control would be to restrict birth rates to less than two children per mother or—even more drastically—forbid childbearing at all. These measures are highly controversial and as humans have other options to mitigate climate change, those should be preferred. Large quantities of emissions can be saved through changes to industry, consumption, militaries, traffic systems, digital communication, and more.

It is important to know that growth rates are very different between the world's regions (UN, 2019). While high-income countries generally have low growth rates, certain low-income countries have high growth rates[5]. If population control was applied, it would certainly be most effective in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the main drivers of future population growth[6]. But since those countries were not the ones who caused climate change, this measure would be unfair (Caney, 2010). Population growth, combined with effective education, can promote economic growth by increasing the availability of skilled workers. Population growth holds, therefore, not only risks, but also opportunities for poverty reduction.

Finally, even though the number of humans is still increasing, the global rate of population growth is declining (UN, 2019). Our population will grow more slowly and stabilize at 10.9 billion at the end of this century. This implies that this growth is not infinite and will regulate itself, mainly through decreasing fertility rates[7].

In his work on population ethics, Parfit explained the 'repugnant conclusion' as follows:

> "For any possible population of at least 10 billion people, all with a very high quality of life [('population A')], there must be some much larger imaginable population [('population Z')] whose existence […] would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living." (Parfit, 1986, p. 388)

[5] By 2050: 50% of population growth will happen in only nine countries: India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Congo, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Egypt, USA (UN, 2019).
[6] By 2050: 50 % of population growth will happen in sub-Sahara African countries (UN, 2019).
[7] At this point, it is tempting to discuss the demographic ageing of our future world population, but this is another essay.

To test this argument, we can assume that the projected future population in 2100 (more or less 10 billion individuals, whether controlled or not)[8] fits the size of 'population A.' Totalists could argue that our future 'population A' in 2100 will grow more and more because there is an incentive to bear more children who could maximise the total well-being. The result would be a human 'population Z:' greatly exceeding 10 billion, with very low individual well-being. However, scientific projections show that the human population, whether controlled or not, will naturally stabilize and remain in a state which can allow "a very high quality of life"—that is, 'population A' (Parfit, 1986, p. 388; UN, 2019). Therefore, the 'repugnant conclusion' is blocked by the natural dynamics of the human population, and totalism does not imply a repugnant future.

Conclusion

I have argued that mitigating climate change by reducing human population growth is immoral because it targets populations who are not responsible for climate change, and because there exist alternatives. Because of delayed impacts on the climate and the self-regulatory effects of population dynamics, population control would also be highly ineffective. I have furthermore shown that, if scientific findings on demographics are included, totalism does not necessarily lead to the 'repugnant conclusion.'

As a final remark, I want to criticize the lack of philosophers from countries with the fastest-growing populations in the discussion about population ethics[9].

[8] If growth is not restricted: 10.9 billion humans in 2100. If growth was restricted globally to a reproduction rate of 2 children per mother per life time, two-thirds of this growth would still occur, resulting in 9.3 billion humans in 2100 (UN, 2019).
[9] Like the essay of the sociologist Monica Bahati Kuumba (1993).

Acknowledgments

I want to thank every participant of this seminar for challenging my cognition and Raphaela for prove reading this essay. Special thanks go to Alex, who opened my eyes to the enriching world of ethics.

References

Arrhenius, G., Ryberg, J., & Tännsjö, T. (2017). The Repugnant Conclusion. Zalta, E. N. (Ed.) In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 ed.): Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.

Brennan, A., & Lo, Y.-S. (2016). Environmental Ethics. Zalta, E. N. (Ed.) In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 ed.): Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.

Cafaro, P. (2012). Climate ethics and population policy. *WIREs Climate Change, 3*(1), 45-61. doi:10.1002/wcc.153.

Caney, S. (2010). Climate change and the duties of the advantaged. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy, 13*(1), 203-228. doi:10.1080/13698230903326331.

Gardiner, S. M. (2006). A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption. *Environmental Values, 15*(3), 397-413. doi:10.3197/096327106778226293 .

Greaves, H. (2017). Population axiology. *Philosophy Compass, 12*(11), e12442. doi:10.1111/phc3.12442.

IMF. (2020). *World Economic Outlook Update. Tentative Stabilization, Sluggish Recovery?* Retrieved 27-02-2020 from https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/.

IPCC. (2007). *AR4 Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report*. Retrieved from https://www.ipcc.ch/reports/ (26-02-2020).

IPCC. (2018). *Summary for Policymakers.* In: *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty*. Retrieved February 27, 2020 from https://www.ipcc.ch/reports/ .

IPCC. (2019). *Summary for Policymakers.* In: *Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems*. Retrieved from https://www.ipcc.ch/reports/.

Kates, C. A. (2004). Reproductive Liberty and Overpopulation. *Environmental Values, 13*(1), 51-79. doi:10.3197/096327104772444776.

Kuumba, M. B. (1993). Perpetuating Neo-Colonialism through Population Control: South Africa and the United States. *Africa Today, 40*(3), 79-85.

Parfit, D. (1986). *Reasons and persons*. New York, USA: OUP Oxford.

Roser, M. O.-O., Esteban. (2020). Global Extreme Poverty. Retrieved February 26, 2020 from https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty/.

UN. (2019). *World Population Prospects: Highlights*. Retrieved February 26, 2020 from https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/.