

Session I

Population Ethics

Partha Dasgupta and Johann Frick
Discussant: Glen Weyl

“Birth and Death”

“Socially Embedded Preferences, Environmental Externalities, and Reproductive Rights”

Partha Dasgupta discusses his model of optimal population growth given nature’s supply constraint. Although he takes Sidgwick’s notion of intergenerational justice as a benchmark, Dasgupta quickly diverges from Sidgwick. In particular, he questions the assumption that a bad life and no life are of equal value and both equal to zero utility.

Dasgupta’s model assumes no technological progress where the total demand for and supply of ecological services is what matters. Adults choose the number of kids to bring into world, knowing that their kids will face the same reproductive choice the next generation. In this dynamic optimization problem, agents are forward-looking and Dasgupta searches for a Nash Equilibrium where all generations are best responding to each other.

Dasgupta notes that there are two approaches to solve for the optimal population level. There is Sidgwick’s approach to solve for the optimum, where one needs to grapple with the question of whether to maximize total or average world utility. Alternatively, we can identify a target standard of living and solve for the sustainable population level. With a \$6,000 a year target, a sustainable population level is 6.7 billion; with a \$20,000 target, a sustainable population level is 3.6 billion, which is a higher level of average consumption and lower population level than those implied by classical utilitarianism.

“Conditional Reasons and the Procreation Asymmetry”

Johann Frick discusses our considered judgement on population ethics and critically examines Jan Narveson’s Procreation Asymmetry and Derek Parfit’s Non-Identity problem. The first conjunct of the asymmetry is that given the choice between creating no person and a person living in misery, we are morally obliged to create no person. The second is that there is no reason in and of itself to create someone given the choice between creating a happy or reasonably happy person and no person. Frick then discusses Totalism, contrasting this teleological view, which holds that the potential wellbeing of all possible people is reason-giving, with his view, which upholds the second conjunct of the asymmetry and addresses Parfit’s Non-Identity Problem.

Totalism, Frick argues, does not take persons seriously. Put simply, people are not receptacles for happiness; Rather, it is the other way around. He explains why the Transfer Thesis, which states that there is no deep distinction between creating more happiness for existent people and creating new happy people, is misguided. With other such values as freedom we do not have this same first order belief—i.e. we have a moral obligation to make existent people free but we do not similarly have a moral obligation to create people so that they can instantiate freedom. Persons matter, as do promises, in the “bearer regarding sense.” There is no unconditional moral reason to create a person, just as there is no unconditional reason to make a promise.

Discussion

Glen Weyl notes that both papers respond to low level intuitions that we have about population ethics. Both views are also consistent with the following statement: it is better for parents to bring a kid into the world who will live good life rather than one not worth living. However, Weyl continues, can any standard oppose eugenics? Eugenic worldviews were widespread until the events of the 20th century. This begs the question, should we take so seriously our moral intuitions about procreation? They could merely be reactions to historical events rather than having deep moral force themselves.

Should we be maximizing total utility, which might imply many people with lives barely worth living, or maximizing average utility, which might imply one person living in bliss? Perhaps there is an intermediate view in which we maximize the welfare of all people who will ever exist, which switches the objective toward average and total utility as the population moves toward one of the two extreme levels.

Q and A

Johann Frick: The idea of incentivizing high income people to have kids is repugnant, but it is structurally dis-analogous to compare the parental decision to the social decision. The social planner asks, “should parent 1 have child x versus should parent 2 have child y?” This is not equivalent to a parent asking, “should I have child x or child y?” The choices of the first question are not mutually exclusive whereas those of the second question are.

A separate moral objection to Eugenics is that it is regressive. A large part of the motivation to have kids is that it enriches lives. Denying this richness to low income parents is regressive.

Greg Mankiw: It is troubling that we have this free parameter determining the value of having never lived. Zero seems arbitrary.

Partha Dasgupta: Imagine being in a coma your whole life. Some have likened this state to zero welfare. This is clearly not the same level of utility as the moment when you decide to pull the trigger on yourself. Just because humans are afraid of death does not mean that most people have a good life. This was Sidgwick's mistake.

Question: I don't have intuitions or considered judgements about these issues, so it is hard for me to share the intuition of the asymmetry. In fact, it doesn't strike me as an asymmetry and I don't feel embarrassed about holding this intuition. Can you motivate why we should think of this as an asymmetry?

Johann Frick: Even if we attach zero utility to nonexistence, there is a noncomparative sense in which people could benefit from being brought into existence. If we do have an obligation to grant benefits to existent people, why don't we when they are not existent? The fact that a future person would have a terrible life gives us a reason NOT to bring the person into existence yet we don't have an obligation to bring into life a person who would have a good life.

Comment: We are not looking for the most good but the conditional most good. This seems to be the view. Is there a deeper justification for such a view?

Johann Frick: We lament a person who lacks happiness but not happiness that lacks a person. Totalism does fully appreciate this. Teleologists may have state-regarding reasons, where the ultimate value is the state of affairs. Those things that contribute to happiness ought to be as fully instantiated as possible. But it is not the states of affair that matter. People matter, and the states of affairs only have derivative value [from people].

Question: what about elderly people or non-productive people?

Partha Dasgupta: An exponential Beta would pick that up. Nature and labor produce consumption. If Beta is zero, we have a pure consumption economy.

Question: 3.2 billion is the optimal population. How should we think about discount rates and transition costs?

Partha Dasgupta: With a high discount rate, the discount factor is low, and in a stationary state, one would have a very high population and low consumption.

What constitutes zero utility? This itself might be a sociological parameter and may depend on others' level of utility.

The bounds of nature also play a large role. We often think that we can combat this bound with technological change. I contrast this view by keeping technology constant. I could introduce technological growth through $X(t)$ and let it rise exponentially.