Abstract (as well as commentary on the abstract) for Stockholm Sept 2018

Thoughts on the Population and Climate Change Project

(with an eye to the September conference)

I take it that part of the purpose of this initial meeting is to give each other a sense of what our expectations are, concerning our own contributions to this project. That at least has been the approach I have taken for the current set of reflections. By its nature, the exercise is speculative: how do I know what I’ll think until I have really thought about it?

But I have some niggling worries about various matters that connect to the themes in play in this project; and I will state three of them at the outset.

1. *Population Ethics and Feasibility*

No-one doubts that an extra life would be desirable if adding an additional life increased everyone else’s well-being. I think there are good reasons to think that that is so over a significant range. Some of those reasons relate to 2 below. But some reflect an implicit debate in economics between Malthus and Adam Smith – simply put between whether diminishing returns or increasing returns best describes the aggregate production processes of the economy. Resolving this controversy in economics does not answer the ‘mere addition’ problem (a purely ethical issue). But it does say that the mere addition scenario may itself be irrelevant over a significant range – which range we could conceivably be in. Sometimes finessing a problem is as good as solving it.

1. *The Separability of Well-being*

A standard assumption in the population axiology seems to be that well-being is separable – that is, that aggregate well-being can be divided without remainder among the individuals who compose the population. To see why that is implausible consider the issue (raised in para 1 of Greaves on Population Axiology in *Phil Compass* 2017) about the decision to have an additional child. At least in the modern context (of cheap and reliable contraception), any new life arises because two persons desire that life to come about. Unless well-being involves no allowance for preference/desire satisfaction of persons, the new life will add to parental well-being. As a conceptual exercise, one might imagine that the well-being gains to the parents are exactly offset by an equal aggregate loss to third parties, but is there any reason to think that that case is at all plausible?

The issue also arises in relation to time discounting over long periods: if agents care about the well-being of their children, they will care about intergenerational effects. And the casual evidence suggests that a principle of “our kids should have it better than we did” prevails. This is relevant to two issues:

Optimal population patterns in the face of climate change; and

whether it is a good thing if people remain childless (something that affects their concern for the future).

1. *Some Doubts about Impossibility Theorems*

I have a general anxiety about impossibility theorems – not in terms of the logical inconsistency of desiderata (in this case intuitions about population) but rather in the way that they frame the optimal response. As Greaves puts it in the abstract to her paper: “*One's choice of population axiology appears to be a choice of which intuition one is least unwilling to give up.”* I think that that is a mischaracterization of the problem that ‘impossibility’ exposes, which is a problem of ‘weighing considerations’ not finding the best ‘corner solution’! In other words, I think that in general one should ‘give up’ on all intuitions to the appropriate minimal extent.

This is an argument I developed in my paper in the Broome festschrift -- in relation to Sen’s “paradox” of a Paretian liberal. The argument is completely general: it deals with the structure of the normative.

I (of course) also have thoughts on greenhouse gas emissions and climate change (some of which I have put into print in the past). But at this point I aim to focus on the population axiology material, which I have not written on before. (This will depend in part of course on what others in the ‘team’ are doing.)