Pronatalist Policies and Future Generations

Demographic theory purports to explain how population systems regulate themselves given available resources. Part of our work in the project will be drawing connections between demographic theory and population ethics. This area is ripe with opportunities for collaboration between ethicists and demographers.

As an example of such collaboration, we are currently working on a paper that highlights a tension between two popular beliefs: the belief in the universal right of individuals to decide how many children they will have (e.g. to have more than 2 kids), and the belief that current generations must respect the rights of future generations. These beliefs are in tension given certain real-world constraints on population growth—constraints that include resources and the state of Earth’s climate. At the workshop we will briefly discuss and expand upon some arguments that we are currently considering. Afterward, we will briefly touch upon some other points of contact between demographic theory and population ethics.

Argument 1:

Premise 1: There is a universal human right to have more than some number N of children ONLY IF, given certain real-world constraints (these constraints are identified and laid out in greater detail in our workshop presentation), everyone could have more than N children. (Moral premise)

Premise 2: It is not the case that given the real-world constraints referred to in Premise 1, everyone could have any more than 2 children. (Empirical premise to be explained in our workshop presentation)

Therefore,

Conclusion: It is not the case that there is a universal human right to have more than 2 children.

Argument 2:

Premise 1: There is a universal human right to do something X only if a small fraction of the total number of people doing X wouldn’t make it impossible for everyone else to do X. (Moral premise)

Premise 2: It is not the case that a small fraction of the total number of people having more than 2 children wouldn’t make it impossible for everyone else to have more than 2 children. (Empirical premise)

Therefore,

Conclusion: It is not the case that there is a universal human right to have more than 2 children.

Other topics that we will be working on include the relationship between disability, inequality and population growth, the non-identity problem, evaluative uncertainty, and impossibility results in population ethics.