Risk, Rights, Democracy, Demography, and Intuitions

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These are the main topics I plan to pursue in the program:

(1) *Population ethics under risk*

Population ethics concerns how to evaluate populations in terms of their moral goodness or choiceworthiness. With a few notable exceptions, this field has mainly ignored issues about uncertainty. Most public policy choices, however, are decisions under uncertainty, including policy choices that affect the size of a population. I shall address the question of how to rank population prospects—that is, alternatives that contain uncertainty as to which population they will bring about—by the relations “is better than” and “is as good as”. One question is how well-known population axiologies can be extended to population prospect axiologies and which new problems that arise when extending population axiologies to prospects. Following my usual methodology, I shall also try to identify intuitive adequacy conditions that should be satisfied by any population prospect axiology and check whether they are jointly satisfiable.

(2) *Can an Appeal to Rights Help in Solving the Paradoxes in Population Ethics?*

Already in his seminal work on population ethics, Derek Parfit (Parfit 1984) dismissed an appeal to the rights of future people as a satisfactory solution to the Non-Identity Problem and the impossibility results in population ethics (see e.g., (Arrhenius 2000b, 2000a, 2011)) and most contributors to the debate have concurred (e.g., (Heyd 1992, 2009; Boonin 2014). Contrariwise, some philosophers (e.g., (Archard 2004; Woodward 1986; Magnusson, n.d.)) have recently suggested that an appeal to future people’s rights, and especially children’s rights, can help with these problems. I shall suggest that these proposals are sufficiently structurally similar to some earlier proposals in the literature on population ethics, such as Fred Feldman’s desert-adjusted utilitarianism, to share the same counterintuitive implications as these theories.

On a more positive note, I hope to develop a useful and sensical way of speaking of future people’s rights since such talk play an important role in contemporary political discourse.

(3) *Democracy, the representation of future people, and population ethics*

It is often assumed that the preferences of future generations have no direct bearing on democratic decisions, since democracy, both in theory and in current practice, only takes into account presently existing people’s preferences. Yet, future people will be affected by our policies, especially our environmental and energy policies. Indeed, most of the people affected by a democratic decision taken today might be future people who didn’t have a say in the decision. This might seem problematic from a democratic perspective. Should we then include future people in present democratic decision-making in some manner? (Kavka and Warren 1983, Bergström 2005, Tännsjö 2007, Arrhenius mimeo).

It has been suggested that there are at least two problems with including future generations in democratic decisions. The first is that future people are simply not around so it is impossible to include them in a democratic process. This might not be an insurmountable problem since future people could be represented by proxies (e.g., Kavka and Warren 1983). However, not much has been said about what implications such a representation would have for the outcomes of current decisions and what kind of institutional mechanism would be required. Should we, for example, establish a kind of ombudsperson for future generations, and if so, what mandate should such an ombudsperson be given? Would this type of representation be compatible with a democratic system? (Beckman and others).

A worry about letting future people have influence on present decisions by way of representatives is that they are going to crowd out our influence. Since it is likely that there are going to be many more future people than there are present people, the latter will be reduced to a small minority that is likely to be “outvoted” on many issues. Thus, our own generation would have almost no influence at all over some major policy decisions. This might strike one as the opposite of democracy (Bergström 2005).

More theoretically, if future people are represented by proxies, what implications will that have for so-called different number cases, that is, cases where the number of people varies in the compared outcomes? As I (mimeo) have shown, on one reasonable idea about representation for future individuals, we can derive a utilitarian-like principle. Hence, we get a theory that implies the Repugnant Conclusion and a surprising connection to foundational problems of population ethics.

(4) *The Demographic Consequences of Climate Change and its Importance for Population Ethics*

I will consider a surprisingly neglected question that I think has important implications for the practical application of climate ethics and which might also help with a solution to the population paradoxes: the likely demographic consequences of different climate change scenarios. One might hope that the population paradoxes won’t appear if we consider only feasible or likely outcomes and it could be argued that it is not much of a problem if the cases over which we have inconsistent evaluations are very unlikely to materialise. So here I shall consider three related questions: (1) What are the likely consequences of different climate change scenarios? (2) Are the hypothetical cases involved in the population paradoxes different from the likely cases? (3) If so, are we justified in worrying less about inconsistency among our moral evaluations of very unlikely cases than among our evaluations of more likely cases?

(5) *Empirical investigation of intuitions in climate ethics*

In the standard approach to ethical theorizing, roughly described, one starts with some fundamental intuitions, or considered judgements, about particular cases and more general issues, and then one looks for an ethical theory that matches as many of them as well as possible. Sometimes this will not be possible, because our considered judgements are inconsistent. This happens in the impossibility theorems in population ethics. In other areas of ethics, there has been a lot of empirical research on people’s intuitions about ethical dilemmas and why people have these intuitions. (See, for instance, the burgeoning empirical research on people’s intuitions about ‘trolley cases’, where you have to decide whether to run over one person or five.) But no corresponding empirical research has been done on considered judgements in population ethics. Malcolm Fairbrother, Krister Bykvist, and I shall pursue such an investigation in the hope that it might shed light on which considered judgments in the impossibility theorems, if any, are less reliable than others. We might also get a null result but that would be interesting in itself. We are still a bit unclear about the best way of pursuing this line of research.