

PROCREATIVE RESPONSIBILITY AND MODERN SPECIES MORALITY A FOUCAULDIAN CRITIQUE OF POPULATION ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

Every ethical theory implies a set of assumptions about human nature related to historically variable conditions of human practice. In the following paper, I focus on a set of such explicit and implicit assumptions about human beings in a new area of ethics, which has come to be known as “population ethics”. Dating back to 1970s, this subdiscipline of ethics concerns itself with moral dilemmas involved in creating people understood as influencing their existence, number and/or identity. This concerns the problem of responsibility for future generations as well as diverse problems of governing present day human populations. Through analysis of the two main opposing standpoints in this field – those of Derek Parfit’s “impersonalism” and of David Heyd’s “person-affecting approach” – I try to show that in its present state population ethics lacks a clear concept of the moral agent, that is a concept of an individual or collective subject acting as a co-author of certain morality of creating people also accountable for its implementation. This lack can be supplemented by Foucault’s concepts of biopolitical processes of subjectivation and responsibilization. Seen from this perspective logical paradoxes of utilitarian population ethics reveal the underlying social contradictions of what can be called our modern “species morality”.

KEYWORDS

Population ethics, procreative ethics, biopolitics, Michel Foucault, Derek Parfit, David Heyd

1. WHAT IS POPULATION ETHICS?¹

Not every part of human life is automatically considered prime material of moral conduct. It is, for example, difficult (although not impossible) to imagine a social context in which men would be urged to develop themselves as moral subjects of breathing. Eating and drinking on the other hand have, for centuries, been perceived as practices requiring self-control to avoid the deadly sin of gluttony, but the

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moral meaning of this aspect of life seems to be changing significantly as it includes ideas such as proper attitude toward animals or fair trade. The initial hypothesis of this article is that we are witnessing perhaps even more symptomatic change in the moral experience of human procreation. This process may have been going on for the last two or three centuries but has only recently surfaced in the reflections of professional ethicists. Studying explicit and implicit foundations of this new area of ethics, known as “population ethics”, may tell us something about the contemporary evolution of distinctively human ways to procreate. *How are humans being made these days?*² More importantly, it’s also about establishing what problems we are facing in the struggles to self-form ourselves into conscious agents of this human freedom, i.e. to become ethical subjects of procreation. *How can we make other people these days?*

In the following article, I will focus on how, for some philosophers since the 1970s, the reflection on the morality of human reproduction morphs into a theoretical challenge (or an ethical necessity) to understand human life on the level of population. Afterwards I will attempt to pinpoint the meaning of some of the paradoxes encountered by them in this endeavour by referring to the modern conditions of human life interpreted in terms of what Michel Foucault has described as “biopolitics”.

We are urged to reproduce “responsibly” and “consciously”. What does this mean? To whom should we be responsible? What codes, values or goals should guide us in bringing new people into our world? A closer look at a specific way of addressing these questions by contemporary ethicists will hopefully throw some light on what it means to be an element of the human population and point to at least some challenges we need to overcome to be ourselves freely in these social conditions. The question of how we should master our recently acquired reproductive powers, freedoms, and rights, seems to be an interesting approach to clarifying (or specifying) these much more abstract and vague problems.

Population ethics is a young field of study which has been named thus in specialist encyclopaedias and academic research programs during the 1990s in reference to a growing body of interpretations of more specific problems formulated by philosophers since the 1970s². There are, as usual in the case of emerging fields of

² Following these references, three such early formulations of ethical aspects of human control over procreation are usually mentioned. We can start with John Rawls posing in 1971 the problem of “intergenerational justice” in two sections of his influential *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1971, secs. 44 and 45). At the same time, Jan Narveson was pondering on the status of “new generations” within utilitarianism (“Utilitarianism and New Generations”, *Mind*, vol. 76 (1967), pp. 62-72) which soon led him to attempt to formulate a few more general “moral problems of population” (“Moral Problems of Population”, *Monist*, vol. 57 (1973), pp. 62-86). Thirdly, population ethics have been influenced very much by the body of literature that accompanied what Thomas Robertson has identified as the last “Malthusian moment” of the 1960/70s (T. Robertson, *The Malthusian moment: Global population growth and the birth of American environmentalism*, Brunswick

studies, several definitions of population ethics aspiring to describe the common points of these problems formulated in the 1970s and to grasp the unity of academic debates started by them. Instead of quoting and comparing these definitions, it may be more interesting to simply ask: “What’s in the name?”. Why did the “population ethics” label stick? Is it really adequate? In what sense do these specific considerations on human reproduction address it as question about “population”?

These questions can be posed and answered in relation to the shortest definition of population ethics that I know of. Inspired by the notion of “genesis problem” coined by Dasgupta³, this definition states that in terms of its subject matter, population ethics is a subdiscipline of ethics concerning itself with so-called “genesis choices”; that is, the moral dilemmas involved in creating people. Wouldn’t it be somehow simpler to categorise the problems discussed under such a topic as “reproductive ethics” or as forming some part of it? Indeed, the very fact that we feel the need for ethical guidance in procreation is relevant to our discussion as this fact is not obvious at all if placed in the context of history of moral philosophies. However, this is not the right place to start asking about the status conferred on reproduction by, for example, ancient Greek philosophers. What is characteristic of modern population ethics is that it perceives reproductive behaviours, choices, and decisions as creating people in plural, of the future, and quite often indirectly. Moral problems of procreation within such a wide context result from the fact that they are impossible to isolate from questions concerning actions or policies affecting the number of people to be created and the quality of their lives. Understood in this way, “genesis choices” immediately get “politicized”⁴ in the sense that they cannot be made with full responsibility independently by individuals. By deciding to beget a child, I not only decide about calling him or her into existence, but also affect the number of kids requiring teacher’s attention in his or her future school class, therefore affecting the quality of education that a whole group of not-yet-existing persons will receive. Furthermore, the special problems that are of interest here most often arise when our actions affect future generations. This way “genesis choices” become “politicized” of necessity, because of their far-reaching, accumulating, and often cascading future consequences. In other terms, human reproduction is seen here as a

2012), with its discussions of the optimal size of the human population and a general revival of modern environmentalism. Articles concerning “the concept of the optimum population” by Partha Dasgupta (“On the Concept of Optimum Population”, *Review of Economic Studies*, vol. 36 (1969), pp. 295-318) – an economist who doesn’t separate science from ethics – are good, because conceptually fertile, examples of this kind of influence.

³ Partha Dasgupta, “On Optimum Population Size” [in:] A. Mitra (ed.), *Economic, Theory and Planning*, Calcuta 1974, pp. 109-133.

⁴ I source the concept of “genesis choices” and of its necessary “politicization” from David Heyd’s book *Genethics. Moral Issues in the Creation of People* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1995).

moral problem not because of the “beginning-of-life issues” (abortion, contraception, assisted reproductive technologies, etc.), but because it affects or even constitutes what German philosophers since Marx have called “human species-being” (*Gattungswesens des Menschen*). Procreation is being thus analyzed as inseparable from the problems that appear at the collective level of “populations”. Hence, the name of these analyses – “population ethics”.

What is being investigated here in a more pragmatic sense are the ethical aspects of such diverse practices as family planning, genetic engineering, demographic policies, environmental ethics, intergenerational justice, education, and healthcare prioritization. In these cases the ethical problems are not only theoretically unique, but also historically new, which may explain why they had not been addressed directly by philosophers until the 1970s. The theoretical uniqueness of this cluster of problems, for which David Heyd has coined a very apt term of “genethics”, results from the fact that they relate to the creation of new moral subjects rather than to the treatment of existing ones; given that “creation” is here broadly understood as determining in varying degrees the very existence, number, and/or identity of future people. The historical uniqueness of the problem is harder to grasp, but may provisionally be singled out, as is often done⁵, by pointing to the modern dramatic increase in humanity’s control over procreation on both the individual and collective level (through the developments in birth control, demographic planning, genetic screening, eugenic procedures and so on)⁶. If we consider historical specificity of population ethics to be one of the formative conditions of its theoretical uniqueness then this explanation appears to be indeed only provisional and will have to be explored in greater depth in the final part of this article.

Population ethics is currently dominated by the analytic and utilitarian or at least the consequentialist tradition. The limited space of the article does not allow me to expand on this characteristic in reference to the voluminous literature produced in this field for over four decades now. Thus, I will restrict myself to presenting how the basic problems of population ethics are being formulated and tackled from two main opposing theoretical standpoints. The first one – which may, as we shall see, be called the “impersonal approach” – has been developed by Derek Parfit as a

⁵ See e.g., David Heyd, *The intractability of the Nonidentity Problem*, [in:] Melinda A. Roberts, David T. Wasserman (eds.), *Harming Future People: Ethics, Genethics and the Nonidentity Problem* (Dordrecht 2009), p. 4 or Donald P. Warwick, *Definition of Population Ethics* in article *Population Ethics* of *Encyclopaedia of Bioethics* (New York 1995), pp. 1954-1956.

⁶ Another quite common type of explanation of the historical uniqueness of “genethics” refers to the fact that accelerating technological progress has presented humanity with unprecedented “existential risks”, i.e. threats that could cause the extinction of the entirety of humankind (e.g. nuclear Armageddon, ecological disaster, badly programmed artificial intelligence, the Malthusian catastrophe, etc.), which have forced us to think about our responsibilities to future generations (see: Nick Bostrom, “Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards”, *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, vol. 9, (2002), pp. 1-30).

discussion of several paradoxes concerning future generations in the fourth part of his famous 1984 book *Reasons and Persons*. The second standpoint is an attempt to resolve or at least obviate Parfit's paradoxes by a consistent "person-affecting approach" investigated by the already mentioned David Heyd in a series of articles from the late 1980s and most comprehensively in his 1992 book *Genethics. Moral Issues in the Creation of People*.

2. PARFIT AND THE "IMPERSONAL" APPROACH IN POPULATION ETHICS

The influence of Parfit's writings on the field of population ethics is indeed hard to overestimate. His conceptual inventiveness gave rise to an immense literature and divided the area almost exclusively between his followers and opponents. Parfit's analysis of the uniqueness of population ethics consisted in revealing, naming, and discussing a series of paradoxes involved in choices affecting future people. He argued that in this field, as in other types of moral considerations analysed in his *Reasons and Persons*, "in various ways our reasons for acting should become *more impersonal*"⁷. In general, "impersonality" is something that Parfit describes purely negatively by pointing to various mistakes we make when motivated by the idea of being good for specific, identifiable persons. In our efforts to do best for other persons or just for ourselves we tend to ignore, forget or misunderstand what we do together. We also often fail in practical reasoning because of problems with identifying people (including ourselves) that our actions really affect as these persons change in time and by reciprocal dependencies. Parfit therefore suggests that we should somehow modify our moral priorities so that they focus on the quality of the outcomes of our actions, the probability of their occurrence, their cumulative effects and so on, irrespective of who is being affected. This new "impersonal" rationality is very explicitly only postulated by Parfit, not presented as such. We don't get to know what exactly "impersonality" would mean in theory, but Parfit seems to believe that the logical fallacies of caring about persons point to (sometimes historically new) meanings, aspects, and conditions in which our lives are "impersonal" *de facto*. In this Parfit, despite his declaration in the introduction to *Reasons and Person* that his philosophy is purely revisionary, does describe – although indirectly – several "impersonal" forms of human life. By analysing the paradoxes involved in our choices (mostly, but not only, reproductive choices) affecting future people, Parfit revealed to many a practical meaning in the "impersonality" of the life of human population – an entity not defined as a collection of persons (or organisms) but by

⁷Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford 1984), p. 443.

variability of its size in relation to time and environment. I will cite here only two of these well-known problems while I focus on the way these are formulated rather than on the often quite technical proposition of addressing them.

We are used to seeing moral reasons for doing something or withholding from it in how this action or inaction affects people – does it improve anyone’s situation or does it make anyone suffer? Similarly, it also seems reasonable to assume that if no person is affected by a given action, then that action cannot be morally right or wrong. But this kind of thinking seems to fail when we consider actions affecting future people. It’s not only because we have problems with identifying persons that don’t yet exist, but also because it is exactly their identity and existence that we affect. This is what Parfit calls “the non-identity problem” and illustrates with an example of a 14-year-old girl who decides to have a child⁸. We want to convince her to wait for a few years, arguing that her child will then have a better start in life. We fail to persuade her and the girl has a child whose life, despite its bad start, is good enough to be worth living. We cannot claim that the girl’s decision was bad for her child, because had we succeed in persuading her to wait with conceiving until she was, let’s say, 18, this child would have never existed. If we still want to defend the claim that it would have been better if the girl had waited, we need to be able to do that without pointing to the person for whom it would be better. This problem can be easily extended to the collective level. Any social or economic policy sufficient enough to have a globally significant effect on the environment in which future generations are going to live will also have an impact on who conceives children with whom, and when. That means that after a century or two in a given community there will be no one living who would have existed if our policy had been significantly different. If none of these future people leads a life so miserable that it would be better if he or she had not been born at all, there is also no one living for whom it would have been better if we had chosen a different political strategy. These arguments lead us to a conclusion that our obligations regarding future generations cannot be adequately accounted for by ethical systems that assume the person-affecting principle; in other words, the claim that if something is good or bad, it has to be good or bad *for someone*. Population ethics, according to Parfit, should be impersonal ethics appealing not to what is good or bad for persons, but to principles about the quality and quantity of the lives that are lived⁹.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 357-361.

⁹ Parfit summarizes his reflections on our moral obligations to future people saying: “In Part Four (entitled “Future Generations”) my conclusions are in the clearest and strongest sense impersonal. If we want to avoid the Repugnant Conclusion, we cannot solve the Non-Identity Problem by appealing to a *person-affecting* principle. We must appeal to a principle which is about the quality and quantity of the lives that are lived, but is not about what is good or bad for those people whom our acts affect” (Ibid, p. 447). As this quote shows, Parfit’s standpoint is in fact more subtle. Had he opted for a direct impersonal utilitarianism, the “non-identity problem” would not have been a problem for him at all.

However, this conclusion leads Parfit to one of his most famous paradoxes; the so-called Repugnant Conclusion¹⁰. If what interests us is the general sum of pleasure, happiness or whatever makes life worth living irrespective of who experiences these things, then for any population enjoying a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living. This population of people leading very difficult lives must simply be large enough for the total sum of happiness to be greater than in the case of a smaller population of very content people. Using a defensible simplification, it can be said that the vast majority of the literature in the field of population ethics written after the publication of Parfit's book is committed to developing a technique of utilitarian calculus that can be used to compare alternative populations; that is, a calculus that avoids the Repugnant Conclusion on the one hand, but still remains impersonal or non-person affecting, on the other¹¹.

The impersonal conception of value is therefore quite openly presented by its proponents as a source of various kinds of puzzles, paradoxes and conclusions that are "repugnant" (i.e. conflicting with our moral intuitions), which – as a natural reaction – provokes a supposition that perhaps it is not that these problems should be solved, but rather that the idea of promoting impersonal values (be it happiness, pleasure, or utility) should be abandoned. Before following this line of argument most rigorously developed by David Heyd, it is worth asking about the source of the tendencies to impersonalism in population ethics, as it leads to some crucial observations about the nature of subjects and objects of actions that are to be morally evaluated by this ethics. This, in turn, will help determine to what extent the "person-affecting approach" to "genetical" problems solve them.

As the idea of impersonal evaluation of various reproductive choices and policies most commonly takes the form of different modes of calculating the aggregated "utility" of the possible future population, it may be good to start with a well-known fact that utilitarian and deontological ethical concepts differ in the emphasis they give to passive and active aspects of human existence. We are both subjects (recipients) of experiences and their agents; those who cause them. The Utilitarian emphasizes the passive side of our nature, or our capacity to be pleased or satisfied. The Kantian focuses on our agency, and is concerned with what we do rather than

He seems rather to be committed to person-affecting intuitions, but always slides into impersonalism when searching for solutions of problems concerning future people (as shown by Heyd in his recent article, "Parfit on the Non-identity Problem, Again", *Law Ethics and Human Rights*, vol. 8 (1) (2014), p. 20.

¹⁰ Ibid, Part IV, Chapter 17.

¹¹ E.g. Jesper Ryberg, Torbjörn Tännsjö (eds.), *The Repugnant Conclusion: Essays on Population Ethics*, Dordrecht 2004.

with what happens to us¹². Because activity and passivity are aspects rather than parts of our nature, and because each can be reduced to a form of another, both basic ethical standpoints can successfully present themselves as complete and sometimes even complement each other. However, in the field of population ethics this connection between activity and passivity of moral agents is severed. What is being counted and weighed¹³ when evaluating populations are peculiar agent-less lives, perceived as series and sums of experiences. There seems to be a meaningful and symptomatic lack of the moral agent concept in the theories of population ethics. In their present form, these ethics have a defined object, i.e. an area of actions being of interest – biologically perceived human populations which can be influenced in terms of size and wellbeing. Whereas it is difficult to imagine a coherent conception of the ethical subject; a moral agent that is a person deciding on a certain morality of responsibility and accountability for future generations and implementing that morality in her actions. Such a person appears in the context of population ethics to be split in their practical reasoning between self-interested rationality of care for the quality of their own experience on the one side and reasons for impartial morality calculating sums of impersonal experience on the other. The source of this contradiction lies, I believe, in the nature of “human populations”, the form of collective being we have been learning to perceive and govern since the 18th century. Populations are not collectives of individuals constituted by, for example, social contract, but collections of quasi-natural phenomena¹⁴, statistically aggregated lives¹⁵ or

¹² For a detailed discussion of this difference in the context of Parfit see: Christine Korsgaard, “Personal identity and the unity of agency: A Kantian response to Parfit”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1989), p. 101-132.

¹³ See: John Broom, *Weighing lives*, Oxford, 2004. Even if just for the title... .

¹⁴ Michel Foucault in his lectures on the emergence of population as an object of power and knowledge described this in the following words: “We have two levels of phenomena therefore. Not a level of the collective and a level of the individual, for after all it is not just an individual who will die, or at any rate suffer, from this scarcity. But we will have an absolutely fundamental caesura between a level that is pertinent for the government’s economic-political action, and this is the level of the population, and a different level, which will be that of the series, the multiplicity of individuals, who will not be pertinent, or rather who will only be pertinent to the extent that, properly managed, maintained, and encouraged, it will make possible what one wants to obtain at the level that is pertinent. The multiplicity of individuals is no longer pertinent, the population is”. “Despite the apparent symmetry with the collective subject of the social contract, something completely different is involved, [that] the population-people relationship is not like the obedient subject/delinquent opposition, and that the population as a collective subject is very different from the collective subject constituted and created by the social contract” (Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Michel Senellart, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2007, p. 44).

¹⁵ For the discussion on statistical construction of “human population” see: Sabine Höhler, “The Law of Growth. How Ecology Accounted for World Population in the 20th Century”, *Distinktion:*

experiences. There seems to be no passage between this level and the level of an individual agent of his or her personal life. It is not a habit of analytical philosophers to place their analysis in social and historical context, yet this is exactly what seems to be troubling Parfit when in the concluding chapter of his book he explains the need for impersonalism, writing that:

Most of us now live in large communities. The bad effects of our acts can now be dispersed over thousands or millions of people. [...] Life in big cities is disturbingly impersonal. We cannot solve this problem unless we attack it in its own terms. Just as we need thieves to catch thieves, we need impersonal principles to avoid the bad effects of impersonality¹⁶.

Impersonality seems to be understood here not only as an axiological concept (according to which goodness or any other kind of value is conceived as valuable independently of its value for actual individual persons), but also as a modern human condition similar to what social philosophers and sociologists refer to as “social alienation”. And if in a broad sense alienation describes a kind of a detachment or inadequacy between human subject and the world that he or she co-creates then it becomes understandable how on a theoretical level of population ethics this human condition is being reflected in the difficulties in formulating a clear concept of moral agent. These problems can also be easily seen if we examine the character of the practical examples provided in the literature concerning population ethics. These examples always invoke either parents wondering whether to conceive a child under given conditions or governments considering various policies affecting the composition and welfare of populations. These two types of agent clearly operate on very different levels, being guided by different motives and rationalities. Nonetheless, from the standpoint of population ethics, actions in both sorts of cases should be guided by the same quasi-economic calculation of impersonal needs and available resources. The relation between the governments and populations is here impersonal and purely external, which becomes strikingly clear when we realize that the ethical relation between parent and a child is being described in the same, intuitively inadequate, categories.

Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory, No. 14 (2007), p. 45-64. For a monographic analysis of statistical construction of social world as such see: Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers. A History of Statistical Reasoning*, trans. Camille Naish, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

¹⁶Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 443-444.

3. HEYD AND THE “PERSON-AFFECTING” APPROACH IN POPULATION ETHICS

In this situation, it seems a good idea to focus more on the nature of subjects making the “genesis choices” and on the status of persons affected by these choices rather than on devising the right calculus of such consequences. This is what David Heyd has been doing for years: exposing impersonalism as a trap that must be avoided in order to solve the puzzles and paradoxes of population ethics. His basic standpoint is that we should stick to “person-affecting principle” in population ethics, which can be done if we accept that when making a demographic or reproductive choice the only persons to which moral considerations are applicable are actual people making these choices. The potential persons who may or may not exist as a result of such decisions cannot be said to have any rights or interests. The unconceived are not some class of people who wait for being saved from the limbo of nonexistence and therefore can be benefited or harmed by being born. All attempts to apply impersonally defined cut-off lines between “life worth living”, “barely worth living” and “not worth living” to ethics of procreation and population policies (as Parfit does) are therefore misguided¹⁷. On a metaethical level this “person-affecting” thesis states that if genesis choices involve the very creation of the conditions of ethics, namely human beings whose will constitutes all value, then “existence [and specifically human existence – JS.] is not a moral predicate; to be cannot in itself be either good or bad, a subject of duty or prohibition, a right or a wrong”¹⁸. Thus, only the interests of already existing people (e.g. parents in case of family planning or present generation in case of population policies) are the determining factor in decisions concerning the creation of future people, their number and identity. Heyd calls this fundamental principle according to which “genesis choices” can and should be guided exclusively by reference to interest, welfare, ideals, duties and so on of the “generators” – respectively, “parentocentrism” or “generocentrism”¹⁹. If

¹⁷ Partha Dasgupta, criticizing the assumptions of Parfit’s Repugnant Conclusion (and associating his own views with those of Heyd), expresses this argument in the following way: “Someone whose life is barely worth living has a low, *negative* level of well-being; their standard of living is below well-being subsistence. They are among the wretched of the Earth; and there are over a half billion such people today, malnourished and prone to illness and diseases, but surviving and tenaciously displaying that their lives are worth living by the fact that they persist in wishing to live. If you were to say that you would not wish the circumstances those people endure on anyone, I would not take you to mean that their lives aren’t worth living; I would take you to be saying that their circumstances are so bad that you wouldn’t wish them on even your worst enemy, that something ought to be done to improve their lives. [...] To say that someone has a wretched life, for example a dismally low standard of living, isn’t to say that the person would have been ‘better off unconceived’. It is only to say that it is *bad* that her standard of living is what it is”. (P. Dasgupta, “Regarding Optimum Population”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2005, p. 425-426).

¹⁸ David Heyd, *Genethics. Moral Issues in the Creation of People*, p. 124.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 96.

we want to argue against the decision made by a 14-year-old mother – as in Parfit’s example – we can do that by appealing to her own interests, to irrationality of her character or to the burden she has created for the society, but not to the consequences of her action for some future unidentified life and for some future possible world *tout court*. The development of such a “person-affecting approach” into an effective framework for population ethics requires that “two fundamental questions must be answered: (1) *who* are the persons affected by genetical decisions; (2) *what kind* of considerations can guide these decisions”²⁰, a task to which the second of the three parts of Heyd’s book is devoted. I will address the concerns raised by these two aspects of Heyd’s concept of the moral subject in population ethics in turn.

Heyd formulates the general criteria for being a subject of moral concern in “genetical choices” in terms of the distinction between actual and potential persons. “Potential people” (who do not fulfil the condition of being “morally considerable” subjects) means here those people whose existence is dependent on moral agent’s choice. This in turn implicates – according to Heyd – that not all actual people (who are the legitimate subjects of moral concern in genetical choices) necessarily already exist, since most of the future people will live independently of any given human reproductive choice or even independently of the decisions of any imaginable, very efficient, empirical agent (e.g. a powerful international organisation like UN Population Fund). This may sound strange – after all, every human being is a product of a quite identifiable act which can be traced to someone’s choice even if it is not a choice to have children *per se* as in cases of accidental, unplanned intercourse. However, if one wants to analyse the responsibilities of the conscious moral agent of procreation it makes sense to assess what lays in his or her control and what contingent facts he or she is obliged to take into consideration. And it is true that making the existence of *all* future people a matter of choice *for everybody* would require not only full control over reproduction but also a full collectivisation of reproductive choices. Is such a “scientificfictional” collective agent of reproduction an idealized model of the ethical subject lacking in population ethics?

Heyd recognises and discusses the fact that the actual-potential distinction, so fundamental in his theory, is “in profound way relative, that is, contingent upon identity of the subjects making the decisions” which results in “strange consequences” and “conceptual difficulties”²¹. Even at the level of simple family planning, when me and my wife decide on having a child, it is the only child that is purely potential, for we must also consider all the other children that will be born independently of our decision, which – from our perspective – makes those children

²⁰ Ibid, p. 93.

²¹ Ibid, p. 100.

“future actual people”. On a collective level of population policies, taking the example of demographic control, we deal mostly with “future actual people” who are in a sense already “given” by the current fertility rate and when our goal is to influence this rate our efforts affect people who appear to be somewhere in the middle: partly actual, partly potential²². Heyd writes that in situations in which we do not exercise full control over reproduction, the “genesis problems” become “impure”, necessarily politicized and their “generocentric” solutions must be supplemented with some other principles and constraints²³. One may therefore claim that if the distinction between contingent and non-contingent future people is so hard to apply in practice, then the “person-affecting approach” gives such a weak basis for deciding in procreative policies that it cannot be called a solution at all. I would however argue the opposite: relativisation of the actual-potential distinction among future people reflects, in fact, quite realistically the current level of the control that humanity has over its own reproduction.

The problem in my opinion lies elsewhere: once again in the dual nature of human population as both the subject and the object of “genetical” practice. Life of populations is as “impersonal” as recognized by Parfit and at the same time, as Heyd shows, it is impossible to be ethically engaged in this life without investing in it some sort of quasi-personal identity. If only values and interests of “generators” can and should guide reproductive choices it means that the ultimate moral motive behind reproduction is pro-creation of “generators” identity. Begetting children is certainly a sort of self-expansion – an attempt to extend one’s existence – but can this rationale be extended to a collective level where individual reproductive choices become elements of wider population policies? When Heyd tries to sketch a morality of demographic planning while holding on to his person-affecting approach, he rightly notes that it is never simply about the number of future people, but rather about the “number of whom?” or the “number of people under what description?”, and therefore in the field of population policies “any decision regarding the status of future people (are they actual and have present moral claims over us, or potential with no such claims) is bound to involve reference to their identity”²⁴. We can therefore assume some degree of responsibility for the future existence and number of

²² “[D]emographic planning must deal with the fact of generational overlap and with the fact that at least some of the future population is going to exist anyway (i.e., its number is beyond our control). In other words, the groups being compared in the effort to increase total or average utility are not actual people on the one hand and potential people on the other, or two alternative groups of potential people, but rather actual people versus a group of partly actual, partly potential people”. Ibid, pp. 136-137.

²³ “The generocentric solution to the problem of existence (...) is applicable to the divine creation of human beings *ex nihilo* – and maybe to family planning in ordinary circumstances. But it must be supplemented by ethical principles and constraints before being applied to population policies and demographic planning”. Ibid, p. 128.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 139.

people of, for example, our own nationality, but what about 9.5 billion people who will, according to demographers, exist in 2050 of whom we know nothing more precise than their number? What we should also confront when constructing population ethics is the fact that in our societies, “identities” or “descriptions” of people are substantially “numerical” in nature from the very beginning (even in case of presently living people). This is because governing a population means governing a global mass of quasi-natural phenomena such as ratio of births to deaths, morbidity, or insurance risk evaluations through thousands of different kinds of rates that identify people purely in a statistical, “numerical” way. And if, according to Heyd, identity defined only by number is a “limiting case in which there is no longer any basis for the distinction between actual and potential” beyond which we fall into a trap of “impersonal comparisons of the idealized type”²⁵ that cannot be made on moral grounds, then what is the status of these statistical identities that appear when we, for example, combine literacy rate, crime rates and GDP per capita? Do we really want to define all kinds of governmental and capitalist practices which operate on these kinds of “impersonal identities” as playing beyond the scope of ethics and having no moral significance, which is what Heyd sometimes does suggest²⁶? At the same time, he is certainly aware of the nature of this problem and expresses it in his own terms by observing that “uniquely genetic, or ‘personal’, identity might be too strong for the morality of population policies”²⁷. What kind of identities do we then deal with in population policies? What does it mean to be “human” (or a “human agent”) in a sense bestowed by belonging to a “human population”?

Following Heyd’s line of thought, we arrive here at the question of reasons guiding the “genetical” decisions. As it was already suggested in the discussion of impersonalism, the main challenge here is to build a bridge between the self-interest informed rationality of the individual and the seemingly altruistic and impartial care for future people or even for the future of humankind. Heyd does a very good job of demonstrating how many decisions regarding the creation of people which seem to demand impersonal considerations can, and in practice are, accounted for in terms of interests, welfare, and rights of actual people. Yet it is meaningful that his final sketch of the rationality of the procreating human agent comes in the last part

²⁵ Ibid, p. 138.

²⁶ Heyd often underlines that in his interpretation the “genesis problems” point to the very “limits of ethics” which means that his “generocentrism” involves a lot of purely sceptical implications (Ibid, p. 94). In one of his earlier articles he even declares that rejecting “impersonalism” “means that ethics should be assigned a more limited role and scope and that some aspects of population policy should not be regarded as having moral significance” (David Heyd, “Procreation and Value: Can Ethics Deal with Futurity Problems?”, *Philosophia*, No. 18 (1988), p. 154. This may sound alarming in a way that every argument about “ethics having no place in politics” has done since Machiavelli.

²⁷ David Heyd, *Genethics. Moral Issues in the Creation of People*, p. 139.

of his book, in a form of non-ethical conditions of any ethical theory which serve as a set of constraints and safeguards for his “generocentrism”. It is, after all, the essence of Heyd’s argument that in a pure context, “that is, where the decisions regarding the creations of human beings (...) is taken in a world in which there are no actual beings”, the reasons guiding such creation “must be exclusively self-regarding”²⁸ and therefore have no moral dimension. It is the impurity of the context of the “genesis choices” that must remove the repugnance of this complete selfishness of the human creators. Some of those constraints are empirical: biological, psychological, and environmental. Here, in comparison to Parfit-like highly hypothetical and abstract thought experiments, Heyd’s analysis of how, for example, the biological overlap of generations makes it natural that “the decision to have children is one of the most selfish of human choices, and parentocentric motives guide not only the positive choices (to create another happy child), but also the negative (refraining from begetting a handicapped child)”²⁹ is refreshingly full of practical wisdom.

What seems to be of greatest consequence for the problems discussed in this article is what Heyd considers the metaphysical constraints or conditions of “genetical” problems. Apart from the direct benefits we derive from creating new people (e.g. welfare, pride, security in our old age), having children is believed to be of intrinsic, non-instrumental value. According to Heyd, this value is no less person-affecting and parent- or generocentric. The fact that begetting children as a “genesis decision” is an act of creation of the very condition of value makes it “the deepest expression of the human power of self-transcendence”³⁰. Here, on the few last pages of Heyd’s book, we find the topics of extending one’s existence and giving it a meaning by “leaving a trace” and participating in the collective enterprise of humankind, its history, and traditions. In this context, the concept of the moral agent of population ethics turns out to require a radical expansion. We read that “if family is an identity-fixing element in our self-perception, then it must also apply ‘diachronically’, that is, in treating the *person* affected as consisting of both the ancestors and the descendants of an individual”³¹. We also learn that the engagement in an effort to realize values and achieve ends that extend beyond an individual’s lifespan does not have to be justified in terms of impersonal values, because “the general response of the person-affecting view to this challenge consists of the extension of the concept of a ‘person’ rather than the abandonment of the condition of ‘affectingness’”³². It is therefore not a surprise that in the very last section of the book devoted directly

²⁸ Ibid, p. 195.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 199-200.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 213.

³¹ Ibid, p. 215.

³² Ibid, p. 219.

to “the metaphysics of genesis”, the main part is played by Kant’s philosophy of history with its ethico-theological concept of humanity. This is the same Kant whose concepts Heyd refuted in his earlier articles as a possible solution to “genetical” problems, on the grounds that it would be a “quasi-religious answer [...] referring to a transcendent value, i.e., a value transcending the welfare of actual human beings”³³. Here as well, Heyd finally backs away from relating “human populations” to the idea of “humanity” as a metaphysical project which “a more modern, post-Nietzschean view may deny”³⁴.

The scepticism towards “enlightened” assumptions regarding the project of humanity is of course fully justified, but the comparison of “impersonalist” and “person-affecting” approaches to population ethics seems to suggest that a basis for ethics addressing our moral obligations to future generations should be found in a theory that would root an individual commitment to one’s life in the species life of the human race. A necessary and crucial prerequisite for such a theory is a concept of multiple subjectivity (in a form suggested by Heyd when he writes about “identities adequate to population policies” and “diachronically extended persons” or any other) corresponding to the population as a quasi-natural object or area of practice. Only by understanding various shapes and levels of the human agent of “genetical” practice can population ethics hope to become a critique of rationality of that practice.

The need for such a solution was of course already pointed out by many philosophers. Christine Korsgaard in her “Kantian response to Parfit” has argued that in the territory of practical reason there is no radical split between self-interest and impartiality, because the personal concern with one’s being is, after all, located among the “ever-widening spheres of agency and enterprise”: beginning with personal concern for the future of my family, for the organisation for which I work, for the state of which I am citizen and “developing finally into a *personal* concern for the impersonal: a concern, that is to say, for the fate of one’s fellow creatures, considered merely as such”³⁵. It is therefore tempting to say – as Robert M. Adams did in his critical note on “Reasons and Persons” – that a better than utilitarian basis for population ethics could be found in an idea of “humanity as a vast project, or network of overlapping projects, that is generally shared by the human race”³⁶. That is

³³ David Heyd, “Procreation and Value: Can Ethics Deal with Futurity Problems?”, *Philosophia*, No. 18 (1988), p. 156.

³⁴ David Heyd, *Genethics. Moral Issues in the Creation of People*, p. 227.

³⁵ Christine Korsgaard, “Personal identity and the unity of agency: A Kantian response to Parfit”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1989), p. 127.

³⁶ Robert Merrihew Adams, “Should Ethics be More Impersonal? A Critical Notice of Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*”, *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 98, No. 4 (1989), p. 472.

probably true, but in order not to content ourselves with these kinds of beautiful declarations – which for some reason have never been realized as there is no well-developed Kantian approach in current population ethics – we must ask about the conceptual relation between the notions of “human population(s)” and “humanity”.

4. THE POWERS AND HOPES OF HUMAN POPULATIONS

The lack of the concept of the ethical subject of procreation in population ethics doesn't by any means cancel out the problems and implications revealed by philosophers working in this field over the past three decades. It wasn't my intention to suggest that those rigorous minds have made a mistake of some kind. What normative ethics does is analyze the more or less widely accepted criteria for evaluating actions (what may be called the prevailing morality) and sometimes on this basis prescribe a more coherent moral code. A question of who, in what ways, for what reasons adopts such a code and feels responsible for implementing it in his or her actions doesn't appear in a normative perspective. Rightfully so, because such a question is indeed necessarily entangled in problems of anthropological, historical and political nature. Therefore, in order to address the problem of becoming an ethical subject of procreation (or – to put it in somewhat simpler terms – in order to ask: “how can we reproduce in a ‘responsible’ and ‘conscious’ way?”), I propose to reach to a very different ethical tradition. This tradition originating from Spinoza and Nietzsche, more recently continued (among others) by Foucault and Deleuze, doesn't focus on morality or codes of ethics. In fact, such constructs are here despised or at least a subject of philosophical and “genealogical” critique. Instead, in this tradition ethics denotes two things. Firstly, ethics is understood as a work of individual on itself, a process of “subjectivation” (Foucault) or a self-forming activity aimed to render individual's own conduct in a given area of life consistent with a given moral code and constitute itself as a moral being, an ethical subject. Secondly, ethics as such a practical, individual, and political endeavor, means also an effort to invent new ways or forms of being an ethical subject. On a theoretical level this bold (maybe even arrogant) idea of ethics as inventing new possibilities of living is of course connected with a critique of previous moralities.

How can looking at the puzzles meticulously described by population ethics from so radically different perspectives be beneficial? Well, as I declared in the second paragraph of this article, it is my intention to study population ethics in the light of two questions: (1) How are humans being made nowadays?; (2) How else can we make people these days? For logical and practical reasons the priority should be granted to the first of these two questions. Out of the philosophers belonging to this alternative tradition of ethics that I now appeal to, it was Foucault who was a true and outstanding historian of modernity and this is why I have been invoking his concept of “population” throughout this article. His theory of biopolitics will now

be used explicitly to show not only the validity but more importantly the political meaning underlying Parfit's paradox of "Repugnant Conclusion" and ethical scepticism of Heyd's "person-affecting approach". After showing how these paradoxes demonstrate that the way humans are being made today is problematic and worrisome, it should become clear why the second question of how *else* can we reproduce is so pressing.

I move on therefore to the matter of historical uniqueness of "genetical problems", that is to the modern human practices and powers that population ethics study, describe and normatively analyse. The bottom line is that "population" is not simply a natural object or a philosophical idea, as "humanity" appears to be, but rather a concept from the area of governmental technologies. Similarly, utilitarianism which provides the dominating framework for contemporary population ethics is not simply a philosophy or even an ideology, but a technology of power³⁷. These ideas of Foucault were formulated in two series of his lectures delivered in the years 1977 to 1979 and in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. Foucault described there how modern rationalities and practices of government have since the 18th century taken the form of biopower or biopolitics organised by the task of administering life of human populations. This concept is, I assume, much better known than the literature on population ethics, so I will not go into much detail about the character of biopolitical practices.

The contemporary "genetical" problems have to be related to the whole history of the "power over life" and not just to its very recent developments such as genomics or the invention of birth-control pill. It's not enough to say that as a result of unprecedented increase in human control over the reproductive process, procreation ceased to be a natural necessity (therefore not a subject of moral valuation) and become a matter of choice. More importantly, the kind of causative power we attribute to this new reproductive freedoms, powers and technologies should be explained. This problem was briefly addressed by Foucault when he wrote about "the socialization of procreative behaviour" as one of "four great strategic units which, beginning in the 18th century, formed specific mechanism of knowledge and power centring on sex". A system of medical, economic, and political incitements

³⁷ "English political radicalism [...] is, rather, an attempt to define the sphere of competence of government in terms of utility on the basis of an internal elaboration of governmental practice which is nevertheless fully thought through and always endowed and permeated with philosophical, theoretical, and juridical elements. In this respect utilitarianism appears as something very different from a philosophy or an ideology. Utilitarianism is a technology of government, just as public law was the form of reflection, or, if you like, the juridical technology with which one tried to limit the unlimited tendency of *raison d'Etat*". Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Michel Senellart, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, pp. 40-41.

and restrictions is “brought to bear on the fertility of couples” in order to achieve “the ‘responsibilization’ (*responsibilisation*) of couples to the social body as a whole (which has to be limited or, on the contrary, reinvigorated)”³⁸. It is this procreative responsibility which founders of demography such as Jean-Baptiste Moheau (1745-1794) or Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) conceived not only in terms of moral duty toward one’s own offspring but also in terms of overall impact of collective practice. Since then procreation ceased to be a matter of household economics or preserving the family bloodline and become one of the instances where the interest of “population” appears as a moral substance attached to individual moral duty. Yet, this attachment of individuals to the future of abstract collective entities is quite evasive and incoherent. As shown by population ethicists, this strange type of biological responsibility is difficult to articulate both in “impersonal” and “person-affecting” terms. For how can a “population” have interest? What kind of interest could that be? How would it relate to individual interests?

It seems that in order to be an ethically responsible agent of procreation we should reckon with the fact that our reproductive choices affect humankind in its most abstract meanings and that these consequences stretch out into the very distant and very unpredictable future. These type of moral calculations are far beyond the capabilities of any human being and even more importantly beyond its moral motivations to have children. However, a simple, almost mathematical impracticability of a moral requirement doesn’t make it any less objectively required. This is where the political reality of paradoxes analysed by population ethicists can be observed.

Parfit boldly recognizes the impersonality of populations and tries to deal with the fact that future people cannot have any personal or collective identity to which we could relate, for which we could feel responsible and which we could want to reproduce as our own. In Foucault’s interpretation, the attachment of procreative behaviours to biological populations changes their function in such a way that having children is no longer about “re-production” at all! It was the pre-Malthusian household, family, clan, or a tribe – what Foucault calls “the deployment of alliance” – “attuned to a homeostasis of the social body, which it had the function of maintaining; whence its privileged link with the law; whence to the fact that important phase for it is ‘reproduction’”. In such social context, the ethical meaning of procreation indeed lay in the obligation to “re-produce” one’s identity. Although, the biopolitical population “has its reason of being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating”³⁹. Parfit’s “Repugnant Conclusion” is a theoretical account of exactly this political imperative to rapaciously proliferate impersonal “lives worth living”. The repugnancy of this conclusion to which the modern mode

³⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books 1987, pp. 103-105.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 107.

of making people leads is far from abstract. The predatory *ethos*, the form of living that our species has adapted during the last two or three centuries in relation to itself, other species and our planet is a well know problem. The change in our ethics of creating future people is of course only one of many changes that are required if there is to be any human future not resembling the “world Z” that the Repugnant Conclusion leads to. A “world Z” described by Parfit in his late article as a world of two species – potatoes and hundreds of billions of humans eating only potatoes and listening only to “muzak”⁴⁰. It may, however, be argued that finding new ethical attitudes to procreation is one of the most important tasks in avoiding such a scenario.

The limitations that Heyd encounters within his “person-affecting approach” to modern coupling of individual procreation with quasi-biological population trends reflect a different ethical aspect of the same social contradictions. Heyd seems to believe that if biopolitical logic of strengthening a population’s lives just as impersonally “worth living” surpasses any responsibility that ethical subject of procreation (individual or collective) can cohesively assume, then we should try to stick to the traditional motive of exclusively self-regarding begetting our descendants “in our image, after our likeness”, that is guided by the will to prolong whatever we consider our identity. It is obviously true that with the advent of the biopolitical imperative of enhancing lives of populations, different kinds of identities that people view as worth prolonging didn’t disappear. Quite the opposite – such representations of human masses as races or nations served the goal of “responsibilization of couples to the social body as a whole”. If so, perhaps we just need to finally construct an identity truly reflecting the values, ideas and interests of the global human population and accept this identity as ours to reproduce? It’s not that Heyd really hopes for such an enlightened solution. His skepticism expresses the conflict between the modern insistence on the value of individual procreative liberty and the strive to manage the population by realizing some abstract “human species-being”. This is why the distinction between actual and possible persons, which organizes Heyd’s reflection, necessarily points to a fantastical but logical idea of a collective agent of human reproduction having full control over this process and making *all* future people a matter of fully responsible choice *for everybody*. This is also what leads Heyd in the last fragments of his book (as well as many other readers of Parfit) to Kantian ideas of humanity as “an end of nature, included in nature taken as existent”⁴¹. So, is

⁴⁰ Parfit uses these metaphors in: D. Parfit, “Overpopulation and the Quality of Life”, [in:] Jesper Ryberg, Torbjörn Tännsjö (eds.), *The Repugnant Conclusion: Essays on Population Ethics*, (2004), pp. 7-22. See especially section 6. “Perfectionism”.

⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928, p. 110.

“humanity” a man-made ideal that the moral agents reproducing human population can in any way be guided by?

In order to pose this question in adequate terms it's worth to recapitulate the four basic characteristics of population as a collective political subject specified by Foucault. Firstly, human population appears both as an object, that is as that towards which political mechanisms are directed in order to have a particular effect on it and as a subject, since it is called upon to conduct itself in a desired way. Secondly, the facts of population are rooted in biology of the human species and thus fall into the category of natural processes, but at the same time are susceptible to intervention through what is called “the public” (opinions, customs, fears, prejudices, etc). Thirdly, because population as a natural phenomenon is ruled by its own laws of transformation and there are always many spontaneous circular effects between each individual and all others, it is a reality characterised by a different type of consistency than a gathering of persons who are subjected to a sovereign or law. Population is very different from the collective subject constituted by the social contract. What matters when we talk about choices affecting a population is not a distinction between the level of the collective and the level of the individual, but between the level of the government's economic action and the level of the multitude of individuals which is only instrumental, because the final objective is the population. Fourthly, what makes a population in its naturalness accessible to governmental intervention is that it is driven only by desire, which for the individual means the pursuit of self-interest. Affecting a population never means conforming to one interest but an engagement in a complex interplay between individual and collective interests⁴². It is in the context of such tensions between individual and collective “conduct of conduct” that the specific cases discussed in the literature concerning population ethics – despite its impersonality and difficulties in finding the human agent in it – turn out to be the typical and pressing practical dilemmas encountered by our societies. For example, is it better to finance programmes of prenatal testing or programmes that focus on screening the condition of women intending to conceive? What methods of controlling population growth are most ethical? In fact, even our private decisions about having a child are increasingly guided by calculations resembling those of modern political economy and can be translated into categories of human capital and man as an entrepreneur of himself. I could possibly end this discussion with one of the most famous of Foucault's statements on the nature of modern man that “for millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question”⁴³. The idea of

⁴²This characteristic is based mainly on Michel Foucault's lecture of April 5, 1978: Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, pp. 333–358.

⁴³Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 143.

humanity as an endeavour constituting some part of our identity, that could guide our choices about how to reproduce ourselves, seems here to be excluded by the reduction of human life to some kind of natural resource, the value of which (is it a “life worth living”?) is calculated and invested.

However, if I had indeed ended with such a phrase, it would leave us with a false impression that the practical importance of the problems considered by population ethics results from the fact that these problems concern some objective biological background of human existence and that the necessity of calculating future lives is an evidence of some modern bestialization of man, of a reduction of human being to this biological fundamental. Even if contemporary population ethics lack, as I tried to demonstrate, the concept of humanity as a project to which a moral agent could commit himself, it does not necessarily follow that this entire problematic should be relegated to the domain of instrumental rationality, which has to be guided from the outside by some higher purposive rationality. This kind of philosophical moralizing simply never works. It could perhaps be better to also search for this lacking humanity in the modern biopolitical practices.

If we look for this ideal identity of human population not in the 18th century, or in the efforts of 20th century totalitarianism to breed “new man”, but in our own times, we will find appeals to humanity that sound quite convincing. Especially as since the second half of the 20th century biopolitical techniques of government have increasingly taken as their object the “quality of life” – something which for population ethics is often only an undefined variable. Just as Foucault outlined the emergence of a human multiple body – the population – in the 18th century, many of his contemporary followers (among whom I would especially build on works of Mitchell Dean, Nikolas Rose, and Ayo Wahlberg) show that we can now also observe the emergence of a multiple subjectivity correlated to this body. If biopolitics deals with biology as a political problem there is also a closely corresponding anthropo-politics dealing with a collective subjectivity of populations – measuring it, mapping it out and intervening upon it in much the same way that mortality rates, life expectancy or morbidity rates are treated⁴⁴. I will provide just one example. As a result of the growing critique of income-based indexes of progress used by the World Bank, in 1990 the UN Development Programme proposed and adopted a new index intended to measure the improvement of “human capabilities”. Known as the Human Development Index, it reflects not only things like income or life expectancy,

⁴⁴For a discussion on the evolution of techniques of measuring “quality” of human populations in the 20th century see: Ayo Wahlberg, “Measuring Progress. Calculating the Life of Nations” *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, No. 14 (2007), p. 65-82.

but also literacy and command over the resources required to enjoy a decent standard of living, the access to the infrastructure of work, entertainment, political and cultural activity, and so on.

Kant, in his *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, also described humanity as a development of *capabilities* inscribed in the human being by nature; a development not in the individual, but at the historical scale of a whole species⁴⁵. It seems therefore that the question of “humanity” still belongs to the domain of practical reason. If “genethics” wishes to provide an answer to or even just a description of our “disturbingly impersonal” lives and of our communities that have become technologically regulated populations, it cannot back away from studying the history of our “genopolitics”⁴⁶, which are guided by the evolving ideas of humanity and the changing conceptions of “human nature”.

Once reproductivity was associated with moral obligation towards the life of conceptual entities such as “people”, “nations”, “humanity”, the “new” or the “future person”, one way of becoming an ethical subject of this obligation is by taking it at face value and reinterpreting in terms of right to realisation of man’s basic needs, his concrete essence and potential. Regardless of the name under which people are made responsible for re-producing the “life worth living” of the population, it is a value of this world, present in the strives and aspirations of our living bodies and minds. Because of that, the “right” to such life, to health, to “whatever is making life worth living” (a reductionist phrase favoured by contemporary utilitarianism) – “this ‘right’” – as Foucault puts it – “which the classical juridical system was utterly incapable of comprehending, became the political response to all these new procedures of power which did not derive from the traditional right of sovereignty”⁴⁷, i.e. to biopowers governing populations. In the context of self-forming as an ethical subject of procreation, this strategy of “turning back” (Foucault’s *retournée*) of biopolitical “responsibilization” has to start with *actual* securing reproductive rights for all human beings – something that population ethicists in their efforts to develop an axiology that could be used to compare alternative populations often assume as a given, which makes their speculations in many respects too detached from the actual problems.

At this point it must be noted that the problematics of becoming an ethical subject of procreation is of course excellently charted by feminist literature. Theorists

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, thesis 1-3, [in:] Immanuel Kant, *On history*, ed. and trans. Lewis White Beck, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963.

⁴⁶ “Genopolitics” is a term proposed by Mitchell Dean that refers to “the way humans’ reproductive choices and acts as individuals, as populations and as a species are attached to political, economic and ecological objectives and aspirations”. Mitchell Dean, “The Malthus Effect: population and the liberal government of life”, *Economy and Society*, No. 44 (2015), p. 35.

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, p. 145.

working in population ethics never have showed any interest in feminist research probably for similar reasons as Jan Nareveson is his pioneering article from 1973 where he claimed that the scale and level of abstraction of such questions as “How *many* people there ought to be?” makes it “not plausible to suppose that the interests or rights of women in particular, have any fundamental bearing on the matter”⁴⁸. Yet, as it was recently shown by Penelope Deutscher in a series of articles culminating in a 2017 book *Foucault’s Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason*, “interest of population becomes a moral substance [when] attached (if incoherently) to individual moral duty”⁴⁹. Now, if one asked, whether this moral duty does have a sex, it would become obvious that biopolitical mode of socialization of procreative behaviours in the first instance “produces female subjects understood as having the capacity to propagate death (to futures, races, peoples, and nations) through reproductive transmission, a possibility presupposing the legibility of procreation both as a conduct and also as the conduct of a conduct Foucault called governmentality”⁵⁰. Of course, there are many less gendered forms of subjectivation related to reproductive “responsibilization”, e.g. figures like “the only breadwinner in the family” or “the government pursuing a demographic policy”. Still, because the levels of power, responsibility, choice etc. that women have in relation to reproduction are unquestionably the highest, feminist philosophers are the most proficient in deploying genealogical methods to investigate the production of ‘reproductive decision-makers’. It is with this proficiency that Deutscher shows how ambivalent the pursuit of reproductive rights is as it belongs ultimately to the same biopolitical deployment which figures procreation contradictory as both free conduct of the individual (“choice”), and a mode by which the life of populations can be managed and manipulated. Disentangling the issues of reproductive rights from the language of “personal responsibility”, “quality of life”, “the most deliberative parents” etc. may in fact require “the defense of poor choice and irresponsibility”⁵¹. Such a “reevaluation” can indeed be achieved only by means of what Deutscher calls “critical ethics”.

Whatever winning the fight for reproductive rights⁵² would mean, it would still be only a beginning of the search for a procreation *ethos* that would resolve the

⁴⁸ Jan Narevson, “Moral Problems of Population”, *Monist*, vol. 57 (1973), p. 62.

⁴⁹ Penelope Deutscher, “Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Volume I. Re-reading its Reproduction”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 29 (2012), p. 127.

⁵⁰ Penelope Deutscher, *Foucault’s Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 65.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 179.

⁵² Which were already recognized almost 50 years ago by UN in the Proclamation of Teheran. This recognition of a legal nature, however meaningful, was perhaps bound to be of little effect, if – like Foucault seemed to believe – the law, as well as sovereignty and discipline, are subjugated to

social contradictions that underlie the paradoxes described by population ethicists. As I have tried to show, both the idea of promoting an impersonal “life worth living” and the idea of begetting children as a sort of self-expansion of “generators” identity, are based on the understanding of reproduction as the spreading, extending, and strengthening of one and the same⁵³ thing that already exists – “human” life. In this sense population ethics, in its current form, can be seen as a theoretical reflection of what could be called “*species morality*”. The task of “critical population ethics” – both as an individual and theoretical effort – would be to criticize and overcome this kind of morality.

This modern prevailing “species morality” would be a morality of one of those “species” which – as we learn in school – “struggle to survive” in the process of natural selection. It is also still this one species which is supposedly destined to “have dominion (...) over all the earth”. But are we really sure what the word “species” means at all? What’s the relation between “species” and the concept of “population”? It is a question worth asking if it really is the identity or “life worth living” of the human “species” that we want to have the right to freely reproduce.

If one is inclined to believe, as I do, the evidence showing that 7-11 billion human beings make demands that cannot be borne without immense damage to human and nonhuman beings across the earth, then it follows that we need a radical change of our ethical attitude to reproducing ourselves. Following this line of thought – exemplified recently by Donna’s Haraway postulate to “make kin, not babies”⁵⁴ – falls beyond the scope of this article. However, it was the intention of this article to confront the field of “population ethics” with “population” as a political category, so as an ending remark I would suggest that perhaps in order to ethically master our procreative powers, it could be beneficial to go further along the Foucault’s strategy of *retournée*. This time it could involve treating seriously (taking it at face value) the meaning of the term “population” in modern biology. Since Darwin, thinking about species as populations meant thinking about living beings as not belonging to any type and not having any kind of essence. From a populationist point of view what is real are individuals, and species or types are only statistical averages⁵⁵. Populations

regulative bio-powers that rule human populations. The 1990 attempts to change the World Bank’s “index of progress” to “Human Development Index” are perhaps a more optimistic sign, for those who hope that reproductive rights will be truly and fully given to individuals because the logic of biopolitics allows for *retournée* on this point.

⁵³ After A. Kojève’s reading of Hegel most French philosophers, including Foucault and Deleuze, would write this with capital letters: “The Same” (*La Même*).

⁵⁴ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulocene*, Duke University Press, 2016.

⁵⁵ “For the typologist, the type (*eidos*) is real and variations are illusions, while for populationist the type (average) is an abstraction and only the variations are real”. (E. Mayr, “Typological versus

are ensembles of singular organisms held together by genetic and ecological bonds, and adapted to a particular landscape. This could mean that the “species morality” aimed for reproducing some abstract, typological essence of human species-being, falls behind what “populations” actually are. Perhaps as ethical subjects of procreation we should abandon the idea of reproducing ourselves in favour of an effort of pro-creating biogeographical landscapes that we are emotionally attached to? This would seem to implicate an ethical technology of treating ourselves as “biogeographical landscapes” rather than individual persons, specimens of our kind, family, nation, species etc. This does seem like an extremely difficult and vague experiment. However, the idea of personal identity has been critiqued and re-worked since Berkeley and Hume. And the time relativity of identity is a crucial part of Parfit’s argument for “impersonal ethics”. Perhaps attaching our identities to our “landscapes” isn’t such a strange idea at all. Wouldn’t procreating ourselves as landscapes be at the same time “impersonal” and “generocentric”?