

# THE CRESSSET

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## *The Ethics of Population and Pollution*

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Before addressing myself directly to the ethical issues involved in the population-pollution problem, I would like to make a few methodological comments about the nature of ethical reflection on these kinds of questions. This is necessary as many think of the ethicist as a kind of moral legislator who determines the right and wrong, the good and bad, of each issue. To be an ethicist would seem to commit one to a claim of moral wisdom and insight greater than that of most men. Thus, the ethicist's job is conceived as being able to dictate the non-ambiguous "ethical solution" for the population-pollution issue.

As much as ethicists may be tempted to assume this vaunted status we cannot do so for a least two reasons. First, ethicists have no special knowledge about the good that other men do not. There is no abstract good to know, but the good comes clothed always in the garment of ambiguity. As such we are limited by the same kind of painful human experience that besets all men. Rather than recommending the "good" we simply try to help men see what is at stake in the decisions that we all have to make.

Secondly, there are no pure moral issues, but rather they come mixed with extremely complex matters of fact and interpretation. For example the issues of population and pollution depend for definition on a great deal of expert knowledge of such people as demographers, ecologists, biologists and sociologists. As an ethicist I cannot pretend to be an expert in any of these areas. I must simply accept a good deal of what they tell me in good faith.

I think there is a problem here as we must be careful not to indulge in a glorification of the expert. This is dangerous because experts disagree and we might easily make the error of enshrining bad science. More important than this however is that such disagreement among "objective" scientists often is the result of basic value presuppositions that they have failed to make explicit.

However this is meant only as a warning. I do not mean to imply or suggest that the findings of scientists are not extremely important for informing our moral options. We must be willing to let new findings direct our ethical response. For at least part of the meaning of the idea of responsibility is trying as much as possible to know what is going on.<sup>1</sup> In as much as expert opinion informs us of this it is of extreme moral importance.

Given these qualifications however I think that what an ethicist can do is to try to suggest a framework within which the issues of population and pollution can be morally discussed with more rigor than otherwise might be possible. The ethicist in a sense is not a man with answers, but rather he is a man with certain questions that he thinks are important to be asked. For in the asking of such questions he tries to delineate as clearly as possible what morally is at stake in certain issues and in so doing perhaps indicate what are some of the possible alternative directions. Ethics is rather like art in this as it is ultimately an attempt to clarify our vision through conceptual stimulation of the imagination.

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### The Overpopulation of the Underdeveloped

I should like to begin by briefly indicating my understanding of the population and pollution issues so you can see the kind of perception with which I am working. This is important, for one's ethical analysis of any problem depends to a great extent how and what one understands the problem to be—my understanding of it might be wrong; therefore, it is important for me to make clear exactly what I think is going on. In other words what I am indicating is that the descriptive task is not simple or non-moral, but an integral aspect of any moral analysis.

First in regard to population I take the problem to be the rapid growth of world population. Population growth in the past has been checked by high death rates balanced by high birth rates—as a matter of fact the latter was thought important as a way of maintaining large families necessary for survival in agrarian economies. However with the advent of modern medicine, control of plague, and better nutrition, to mention just three reasons, the birth rate is now far exceeding the death rate. Coupled with this is the phenomenon known as the “doubling effect.” It took until 1850 for the world's population to equal a billion. From 1850 to 1925 a second billion was added, and by 1960 a third billion was added. We are expected to reach four billion by 1985. This of course is but the concrete realization of Malthus's insight that population growth occurs in geometric proportion rather than arithmetic.

What is especially disturbing about this increase is it is occurring in its most dramatic forms in underdeveloped countries where population already exceeds food production. The upshot of this is that we can anticipate in the next fifty years mass starvation and sickness that results from malnutrition. Even Donald Bogue, the most optimistic of the demographers, in arguing that the population crisis will be over by the 21st century says that in countries such as India, China, Indonesia, Mexico, and Egypt there is no way to avoid mass starvation.<sup>2</sup>

Also intimately related to the question of population beyond that of starvation is the human problems brought on by population density—increases in tension, stress, urbanization, and the question of whether our political forms can handle the problems arising from the growth of population. In the light of this analysis many are concluding that morally we must do something to reduce the rapid growth of population.<sup>3</sup>

The one issue that stands out among these kinds of problems however is of course that of pollution. What starvation is to an underdeveloped country pollution is to the developed. Increased industrialization and waste occasioned by our population growth is threatening our environment in a way that even if we are able to feed ourselves we may not be able to survive. This is not just a matter of destroying what natural surroundings we have left, but it is a question of the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink—we are in effect poisoning ourselves by the very necessities of the prerequisites of living in a mass industrialized society. Therefore pollution and population go hand in hand; we cannot effectively do anything about the one without doing something about the other.

This is how I understand the situation descriptively today. Such a description could be wrong, but I think that the realm of proof now rests on those who would argue to the contrary. Once the issue is put in this stark way, however, the natural reaction of many is one of shock and then a determined resolve that something must be done about the coming crisis. The primary assumption often behind this response is that survival is the main value at stake and that all steps necessary must be taken in order to reverse the current trend. It is a corollary of this assumption that any means can be justified in this situation in order to achieve the end of reduced population growth.

For example there are only two ways to reduce population growth—increase the death rate or decrease the birth rate. Most of those who assume that survival is the one value presupposition involved in this question endorse some rather extreme and coercive ways of controlling the birth rate. However they also often assume that it is appropriate to use certain techniques to increase the death rate. They are, for example, impressed by the statistic that shows the most effective way to institute a sudden and dramatic drop in the birth rate is to resort to widespread abortion (and abortion is a death increase strategy; it is not birth control).

In such a context abortion is simply viewed as a means to a morally good end—no longer is the question of abortion considered as an issue in itself, the question of the viability of the fetus is often not even raised—it is simply assumed that the already born have a claim to life that is greater than that of the fetus.

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However as this argument now stands one must ask what prevents the same kind of reasoning from being used as a justification for the destruction of all unwanted infants before they reach their first year. That way we could separate the wheat from the chaff with greater precision. Or given the logic of the argument one must not ask why the proponents of abortion as a means to solve the population crisis do not recommend that all those over 65 be eliminated in the name of the good of the whole. (Of course that is not efficient since they are past the time of child rearing.)

### **Who is to Suffer for the Good of Us All?**

What I want to illustrate by these examples is that the form of the argument that is often used to discuss the population crisis is the classic utilitarian argument that the good of the whole justifies and dictates the right moral policy—and the good is identified by the quantitative satisfaction of the individual desires of the greatest number. But as soon as the argument is stated in this abstract form we can ask some rather important questions about it: (1) what is the content of such a good; (2) who is to decide what such a good is; (3) who is to suffer for the good of the whole; (4) and finally are any means justified if the desired end is achieved.

As soon as such questions are raised it becomes clear that the moral issues in the population pollution crisis are more complex than simply the question of survival—that is they are more complex if we are interested in surviving as fully human beings—otherwise we may simply be willing to survive at a cost of employing measures that would make us less than human. It is to recognize that human life is not an end in itself if it is divorced from the moral values that make human life worthwhile.

Often when someone raises these kinds of questions that challenge the reigning orthodoxy surrounding the population issue the questioner is accused of being more concerned with the quantity of life than the quality. For example Robert Ardrey in a recent *Life* article says, “The humanist preoccupation with the numbers game has sacrificed human quality for human quantity. Life must be prolonged, whatever agony it presents to the dying. A child defective physically or mentally must somehow be saved to join the breeding population.” He concludes “that we will find out one day over-protection of human beings will produce a genetic collapse in the most compassionate population.”<sup>4</sup>

While I do not wish to attribute Ardrey’s views to all who follow this line of reasoning I do think that it makes clear the logic of the position. But it must also be pointed out that contrary to Ardrey’s assertion it is those who adhere to the utilitarian argument that are concerned with the numbers game as they assume that all men can be treated as strict numerical entities to be added and subtracted as inorganic units. It is not finally an issue of quantity versus quality, but rather differing interpretations of the quality of life.

In this connection I must admit that I am a bit concerned how some understand “quality of life” in the debate of the population issue in this country. For I sometimes think that they are more concerned with preserving a certain kind of middle class standard of living than moral quality. This is probably an overstatement but we must be on our guard not to use the population issue as a support for our own self-interest. In this respect it is interesting to note that some black Americans are extremely suspicious of the population argument as they perceive it as a possible attempt at genocide.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, much of the third world views the attempts to regulate their birth rate as but a different form of Western imperialism.

In the light of these questions I should like to suggest that the moral issues raised by the population pollution crisis are best understood in relation to the dialectical values of self-determination and community.<sup>6</sup> By self-determination I do not mean just the possibility that men have to determine their futures through their beliefs, intentions and choices. Such ability is of course a prerequisite for the values of self-determination, but it is not the normative principle itself. Normatively, self-determination embodies those aspects of our moral existence that allows us to determine, rather than be determined by, the natural. This is the reason that the value of self-determination is so basic in any consideration of human behavior. It is that aspect of our lives that insures the possibility of human creativity and freedom and thus human significance. Because we are self-determining we are able to form our lives in accordance with our perceptions of good and right, which provides the basis for our assumption that we can be held accountable for our beliefs, choices, and actions.

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The value of self-determination is related to many different kinds of our institutional behavior. For example, it is the primary value underlying the personal nature of human sexuality and propagation. As humans we think it important that we claim certain rights in regard to our responsibility for regulating our sexual activity. In this sense it is also the value to which those adhere who advocate birth control as they assume that what it is to be a man is to shape rather than be shaped by his sexual “nature.”

But equally important for human behavior is the value of community. Men cannot determine themselves in a vacuum for the content of their self-determination comes from their social groups. This is not just a recognition that men are basically social animals, but it is also a normative prerequisite for significant human experience. To be human is to be other-regarding. It is to recognize that our self-determination must be limited in accordance with the rights of others.

### Individuals in a Wider Ecological Community

This aspect of our moral being is institutionally and concretely determined by sets of expectations that allow us to be able to count on and trust the others. These expectations can be thought of as boundaries over which we cannot go if we are to maintain our existence together. Such boundaries of course can and do become perverted to serve causes that are detrimental to the human group, but such perversions do not cancel the basic significance of such sets of expectations. In this respect however it is extremely important to denote the kinds of communities to which we belong, for as men we will be as limited as our most inclusive communities.

What is interesting of course about these two sets of values is they are not necessarily consistent. Often the value of self-determination is stressed to the extent it is destructive of community; or human community can be made so exclusive a value it results in the oppression of human creativity. No abstract balancing of these two values can solve the hard historical problem of striking the proper balance between them as this must be worked out in the contingencies of our concrete existence.

It seems to me that it is just this kind of problem—that is balancing the values of self-determination and community—that the population and pollution crisis is occasioning. The central issue I think both are calling forth is the question of community, for both force us to ask if part of the cause behind this crisis is not due to the fact that many of us have been working with too narrow community loyalties. For example the issue of pollution forces us to realize that our communities cannot just be limited to our immediate families and localities. It reveals that we are ecologically tied together in a network of interdependence. Unless we recognize this and work for a genuinely common good, a good that is not identified with each of our individual satisfactions, then we may all have to live less wholesome and healthy lives.

In a way this problem reveals beautifully that if self-determination is to be sustained it depends on adherence to a community loyalty. We must communally decide to limit our individual potential as pollutants or we will find that we have not gained more self-determination but less. In a sense this problem is calling us to consider the importance of the idea of the common good for the criterion of governmental action.

This is even more to the case in respect to the question of population, for this problem is forcing us to see that in reality, not just in ideality, we are in a community with men everywhere. We in America cannot morally afford to ignore this as a problem for all the world for we are bound up with the destiny of the human community. In more personal terms this problem is forcing us to see what has always been true about human sexuality, but what we have often ignored—that is that procreative behavior is an individual *and* communal right. Our sexuality is not an inherent right that cannot be balanced by the demands of others—in fact if it is to remain our right at all we must learn to limit it for the good of the community.

Thus the population-pollution crisis does raise serious moral questions — but it is not alone the question of survival, but rather it is the question of what kind of human communities do we want to live in. It seems to me that we would want such communities to at least allow for the significance of men’s self-determination as it can be ordered to the common good. Society serves as the enhancement of our self-determination not as its defeat.

In this respect as we go about meeting the necessity of reducing population growth we should place a premium on birth control rather than death enhancement. This means I would favor if necessary extreme

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coercive birth control measures before I would resort to abortion. Moreover this means that we would try to use those methods that would as much as possible preserve the voluntary nature of the propagative process. Thus the importance and responsibility of becoming informed on these issues is to be stressed.

Beyond information such steps the society can take to encourage small families such as tax breaks should be encouraged. Also better infant care should be stressed (especially in underdeveloped countries) as a way of making clear that large families are no longer a necessity.<sup>7</sup> It is important in this respect to understand the wide range of possible ways to reduce population growth as a way of increasing our ethical option.<sup>8</sup>

Each of the methods I have suggested above are designed to encourage the growth of community responsibility, but the question arises what if there is not time for voluntary family planning to work, as it would seem already the case in some underdeveloped countries.<sup>9</sup> It may be that more coercive techniques are necessary in such situations, but if so they must be justified in terms of the common good. Such coercive strategies should be used as much as possible to enhance human freedom and encourage responsible community behavior. For it may well be that survival is the question at stake but let us make sure we survive as humans — that is as men who are free to determine themselves in accordance with the need of the other. †

### FOOTNOTES

1. See H. R. Niebuhr's analysis of the nature of responsibility and in particular the importance of interpretation for it in *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 47-65.

2. Donald Bogue, "The End of the Population Explosion," *The Public Interest*; No. 7, Spring, 1967, pp. 11-20.

3. The best known statement of the problem is Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969). Ehrlich's sensationalism however tends to prevent rational discussion of the Issue.

4. Life, "Control of Population," (February 20, 1970), pp. 48-61.

5. Nathan Wright, "Black Power and Black Genocide," *The Black Scholar* (December, 1969).

6. I am here dealing with what I think are the explicitly ethical questions. These issues also raise more fundamental problems concerning the theology of nature and man. For a provocative statement of these issues see Frederick Elder, "Two Modern Doctrines of Nature," *The Religious Situation*, ed. by Donald Cutler, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 367-394; and Roger Shinn, "Population and the Dignity of Man," *Christian Century*, (April 15, 1970), pp. 442-448.

7. Arthur J. Dyck, "Religious Factors In the Population Problem," in *The Religious Situation*, edited by Donald Cutler, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 163-198.

8. For the most comprehensive analysis of the various techniques of population control and their ethical assumptions, see Bernard Berelsen, "Beyond Family Planning," *Science*, (February 7, 1969), pp. 533-543.

9. Kingsly Davis, "Population Policy: Will Current Programs Succeed?" *Science*, (November, 1967), pp. 730-749.