I. The Uniqueness of the Problem

The confrontation with completely novel experiences and phenomena often brings about not only revisions and necessary accommodations in accepted theories but also more radical changes and a reconsideration of meta-theoretical assumptions. Such new data may challenge the conception of the very scope of a discipline or the legitimate application of a certain type of reasoning. This process, well-known and often studied in the development of scientific theorizing, has an analogy in ethics. One fairly dramatic case which illustrates this analogy is the new and intensively discussed field of the ethics of population policy and inter-generational justice. The new facts giving rise to ethical reconsideration are the increasing control over the process of reproduction, both on the collective (demographic) and the individual levels, advances in methods of birth control which enable us to decide whether we want to have children, how many, and when, and medical progress in determining who is going to be born (e.g. artificial insemination, genetic screening, and eugenic procedures).

A typical feature of most discussions of population ethics and future generations is the paradoxical nature and counterintuitive implications of all traditional solutions. The reasons for this perplexing state of affairs can be put in terms of the three levels of moral discourse:

1. On the level of moral intuitions: it seems that our intuitions concerning our relation to future people are not only far from universally shared but often also unclear to ourselves. Do we owe anything to future generations? Their very existence? Their minimal welfare? How far into the future? At what price to ourselves? And how should this price be distributed among us and between us and our descendants? Some of the vagueness regarding these questions will probably gradually be dispelled as prolonged experience and the formation of social demographic policies yield clearer judgements on this pre-theoretical level. However, some of the uneasiness we feel in
being forced to make such judgements is due to conceptual difficulties in the way in which the questions themselves are put. Here only theoretical analysis can be expected to clear the ground.

2. On the level of moral theory (ethics): it seems that no existing ethical theory lends itself to easy extension to the inter-generational dimension. Direct applications of utilitarianism (total, as well as average) lead to unacceptable conclusions. Kantian ethics and contract theories yield paradoxes, especially with regard to the determination of the scope and identity of the moral community (Kingdom of Ends) or that of moral membership (in the Original Position). All these theories must either be revised in a way that would incorporate the futuristic aspects of morality, or be replaced by completely new theories. We have so far witnessed many attempts of the former kind, but naturally not many of the latter kind.

3. On the meta-ethical level: we perceive a difficulty in attaining a ‘reflective equilibrium’ between the first two levels. This may lead us to skeptical conclusions: are questions concerning the existence, identity, number, and quality of life of future people genuinely moral? Are they not matters of aesthetic beliefs, religious convictions, personal taste, natural drives, romantic fantasies, irrational desires, non-moral ideals? We are thus forced to reconsider the limits of ethics and the demarcation between the moral and the non-moral.

Obviously, a great part of the fields of demographic policy, conservation, long-term investment, the transmission of knowledge and cultural heritage, etc., will always have important moral aspects. Despite the well-known difficulties in identifying these aspects, future people cannot be stripped of their moral status just because they are not around yet. We have some moral responsibility towards those who will exist in the future, for sheer temporal distance is no more a reason for moral discount than is spatial distance. But does this mean that we are also responsible for the existence of future people (or, for that matter, their non-existence)? Does it mean that we must create persons of a certain kind or with a certain quality of life? Are there any moral restrictions on the number of future people we choose to beget?

The assumption underlying the present paper is that there is a sharp distinction (though not easily definable) between matters relating to the quality of life and welfare of future people and those relating to their existence, number, and identity. The general claim which I will try to support is that only the former can be treated in moral or ethical terms. The latter lie beyond the scope of moral reasoning, unless they indirectly affect — as they often do — the former kind of question. This view,
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which seems to carry some radical implications, will be substantiated in terms of a certain conception of value and in the light of some metaethical assumptions regarding the subject matter of ethics.

Our discussion will focus on the type of consideration guiding us, actual people of the present generation, in determining the very existence of future people, their number and identity (which is controllable by the timing of conception as well as by more artificial genetic manipulation). We will not deal with the morality of policies which will affect the standard of living and quality of life of future people whose existence is 'given,' i.e., not decided by us. Hence, it may be more natural to refer to our problem as that of demographic planning and population policy than that of inter-generational justice (which has distributivistic connotations).

The extreme limiting case of the demographic point of view is the context which Partha Dasgupta has called "the Genesis problem," where no actual people exist. A non-human creator is to decide from an impersonal standpoint whether and how many persons to create, and who. The formulation of guiding principles for his decision appears a puzzling task, for which rational, let alone moral, criteria are hard to come by. Yet, my general thesis would be that our situation, as population policy-makers for the future, at least partly, resembles the Genesis problem more than Dasgupta wishes to acknowledge (calling our problem "Actual"). For apart from the aspects of our population policies affecting the welfare of future ('given' or actual) people, these policies resemble the type of decision made on the sixth day of Creation. The only significant difference is that our considerations regarding procreation affect us, actual people, and hence (unlike Dasgupta's Genesis problem) can be guided by rational and moral principles. This can be succinctly put as the difference between creation (of human beings) and procreation (by human beings). I shall therefore borrow Dasgupta's term but use it in a sense extending beyond its original meaning. Problems of procreation are unique among moral problems because they involve the creation or 'genesis' of moral subjects rather than the treatment of actual ones.

II. Some Puzzles and Their Common Source

Most moral problems relate to actual people with a determinate identity. This does not necessarily mean that the identity of the people concerned is always fully known to those who make decisions regarding them. We can take the welfare of the residents of a remote Pacific island into
moral consideration when we deliberate a ban on nuclear tests in that region although we will never know who they are. Similarly, the American Government should respect the interests of the future population of the United States when it plans nuclear reactors and the dumping of nuclear waste, although the identity of future persons cannot be known today. Suffice it to say that we know they will in fact exist and that their identity will be determined independently of our decisions.

But what of those few choices which affect rather than presuppose the existence and identity of persons? Are they of a moral character and accordingly analyzable in terms of traditional ethical theories? Most contemporary treatments of futurity problems maintain that they are, but puzzling and paradoxical stumbling blocks ultimately confront every discussion. My supposition is that these discussions all fall into the common trap of ‘impersonalism’ (which confers moral value on states of affairs independently of persons), and that only by ridding ethics of impersonalism can the puzzles be solved and the paradoxes avoided. But this 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.

Classical utilitarianism is typically committed to the promotion of an impersonal value, be it happiness or pleasure. Both the total and the average views lead to intuitively unacceptable consequences when applied to demographic planning. On the one view we are forced to acknowledge a duty to beget as many children as possible, even if they are relatively unhappy, as long as the total utility is promoted. On the other view we are bound to add an indefinite number of people who enjoy a slightly higher quality of life than our own so as to promote the average utility. (We are also prohibited from giving birth to any individual whose quality of life will be even marginally lower than the existing average.) These are definitely unacceptable, or in Parfit’s words “repugnant,” conclusions. Furthermore, classical utilitarians are obliged to say that a world of 4 billion happy people is morally better than a world of 2 billion equally happy people, which although not a repugnant proposition is still puzzling to our common judgement which is ordinarily indifferent between the two. Assuming the same average standard of living, is the U.S. a better place than Canada just because it is more populated? And as the non-existence of people must be treated by impersonalism as zero happiness, a utilitarian must make it a moral requirement to continue the human species, as long as the net utility balance (total or average) is positive. If suffering outweighs happiness,
humanity ought to be destroyed and non-existence preferred to a miserable existence.³ Both conclusions are baffling to our moral intuitions. It is also intriguing to think of the existence of a person having an equal measure of happiness and pain (i.e., utility zero) as having the same moral value as the non-existence of this person. Even if utilitarianism is consistent, its consequences are often puzzling.

Application of Kantian principles to future generations is also problematic. How are we to test a maxim concerning procreation? Who should be included in the community in which the maxim could be willed (or adopted) as a universal law: the existing generation, or the existing generation plus those on whose very existence we deliberate (plus their potential descendants)? The latter option leads to a paradox, for this group is by definition indeterminate; all options, however incompatible, concerning the size of future populations can be formulated in universalizable maxims. And if we take 'respect for persons as ends' as our guiding principle, it seems logically faulty to choose to conceive a child because of respect for 'him' as an end. When the choice is made, 'he' is not there to be respected. Similarly, respect for persons cannot justify the avoidance of bearing a child. Unlike utilitarianism, the Kantian Imperative seems to lead to inconsistent and paradoxical consequences when applied to future (possible) persons, not only to counter-intuitive conclusions.

Similar logical problems beset a Rawlsian contract theory.⁴ Some critics and interpreters of Rawls' views on inter-generational justice have rightly pointed out that if all people concerned (or their representatives) are to participate in the Original Position (which is a pure Genesis problem), then the number and identity of the contractors cannot logically be determined. For the contractors have to decide, among other things, exactly who will be born, i.e., who will take part in the contract! And even had it been possible to identify the group of all biologically possible persons throughout the history of the human species and make them partners to a contract, they would never have been able to agree on principles for population policy, since no one of them would have been able or willing to consider the probability of his non-existence as a real negotiable option. Such a situation would only yield a decision to let everyone of those possible persons come to actual life. On the other hand, the vicious circularity of the proposal of inter-generational representation can be avoided by adopting the alternative interpretation, actually proposed by Rawls, according to which only contemporaries take part in the original position, though without knowing to which particular generation they belong ("the
present time of entry" interpretation). But this revision would hardly solve our problem, since the contractors would know that they belong to a generation which will actually exist, whereas a demographic policy is exactly required to decide whether a certain generation will exist and how big it will be. The present-time-of-entry interpretation is only effective in dealing with distributive questions such as investment and conservation but not with purely 'existential' (Genesis) choices of procreation. Only by committing himself to an intrinsic value of the development of justice or other values independently of the existence of human beings can Rawls deploy the contractarian method to deal with population policies. But such an impersonal view of morality and justice seems totally alien to the spirit of his theory of justice. Furthermore, the fact that the contractarian method cannot be applied to demographic problems makes it more difficult to agree on a savings principle, because the amount we ought to save is partly determined by the size of the future population.

The puzzling nature of the Genesis problem can obviously best be perceived in the religious context of the initial act of creation. It is a theologically intriguing problem, often discussed in connection with the problem of evil: why should God have created the world or humanity to start with? Was it because of certain insufficiencies in God Himself? Is the existence of human beings better than their non-existence (even if their existence means inevitable sin, suffering, evil, and imperfection)? Is God guided by a moral principle in creating human beings? For whom is God's act of creation valuable: for God? for man? or maybe the question itself makes no sense? Should God have brought into existence other creatures who would have been happier, more perfect, morally better than humans? These are complex questions, which are not the subject of this article. We are only interested in their structure and source, which are common to those of the previous puzzles.

Some quasi-religious answers to the moral reason and value of procreating new people refer to the ideal of human progress or to the perfection and completion of the hitherto unfinished human enterprise. These are called quasi-religious because they all refer to a transcendent value, i.e., a value transcending the welfare of actual human beings. This on the one hand makes it possible to give a reason for the continuation of the human species, yet it leaves us perplexed with regard to the source of value of these impersonal ideals. For it implies the paradox of making happy people instead of making people happy, of making just societies instead of making societies just. Much of Utopian thought is marred by this uneasy implication, i.e., ideal-type
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theories such as Plato’s and ‘historicistic’ approaches such as Hegel’s. Eugenic thought can also be classified under this head.

The fact that decisions about procreation involve both the existence and the identity of persons is a source of conflicting and vague intuitions when deliberated from a moral point of view. For even if one can ascribe value to one’s very existence, this can be done only under a description that determines one’s identity. Losing my identity, or having a different one to begin with, is to me like stopping to exist or not existing at all. Thus the incommensurability of the value of my being with that of ‘my’ non-being extends also to the relation between the value of creating a person X or (as in Parfit’s example) waiting some time and creating a person Y in his stead. This incommensurability runs deeper than that often attributed to inter-personal comparisons of utility between actual people, since it has to do with the existence and identity of the subjects rather than with the nature of their happiness or satisfaction. So whatever the criteria of personal identity are (biological, psychological, all-or-nothing or gradational), traditional moral reasoning seems to be problematically strained when it goes beyond them in comparing possible states of affairs. Such is the problem in the case of family planning or population policy, and indeed also in that of suicide and euthanasia.

A recurrent puzzle in the ethics of population policy, which is an off-shoot of the problem of identity, is the alleged asymmetry between the duty to refrain from bearing an unhappy child and the absence of a duty to bear a happy one. It is said that the unborn happy child cannot be said to have lost anything by not being born and cannot complain for not having been conceived, while the unhappy child brought into the world will actually be suffering and have grounds for complaint. This asymmetry matches our intuitions but is theoretically difficult. It is, for example, argued that the asymmetry could be overturned: an unborn potentially miserable child cannot be grateful for not being born, whereas a happy child who is given life can be grateful. Some would thus conclude that the two options are symmetrical. But this can be based on two contrary grounds: either both are equally weighty or obligatory from a moral point of view (typically the claim of classical utilitarianism), or neither has any direct moral significance and cannot be decided in ethical terms.

What seems to be the common cause of perplexity behind all these puzzling challenges to our moral intuitions is their impersonal conception of value. The uniqueness of the Genesis problem or that of the procreation of future generations lies exactly in the fact that it rests
heavily on an impersonal approach to such notions as happiness, justice, aesthetic variety or richness, realization of ends, and actualization of potentialities. Indeed, goodness itself is conceived impersonally, that is as valuable independently of its value for actual individual persons. It is only on the impersonal view that coming-to-exist can be seen as good in itself, with all the uneasy implications this has on principles of population policy. In section III we will show how the above-mentioned puzzles can be solved by a shift to a 'generocentric' view. This shift requires an alternative to the impersonal approach to value, as will be discussed in section IV.

III. Generocentrism and Parento-centrism

My proposed model of solution is labelled generocentric, as it takes the present generation, viz. that making the demographic choice, as the only relevant group to which moral considerations are applicable. The term should not be understood as implying a preference or a priority given to the present generation in relation to future ones, for a principle of social discount, if at all justified, can apply only to the degree or force of the claims of various groups of actual people. Our problem, however, concerns the principles guiding the creation of new people, who — being potential — cannot be said to have any rights or interests, whether equally weighty or lesser than our own.

The generocentric model is obviously highly abstract and idealized, for it is based on the assumption that all future people can and will exist only as a result of our (present generation's) choice, that is to say that every generation finds itself in the godly status of the Genesis problem. As population growth is, as a matter of fact, governed by forces and causes which are mostly not directly controlled by free choice, many future persons should be treated as actual, i.e., as 'given' in the same way as our contemporaries are given to us. This makes them legitimate members of the morally relevant group whose interests and rights should be taken seriously. The distinction between actual future people and potential (or merely possible) people is not easy to apply in our world, but this does not make the idealized generocentric model practically insignificant; for with the advance of methods of individual birth control and political means of demographic planning (which indirectly affects the rate of growth) the process of procreation will get closer to the idealized (Genesis) case. Family planning by a couple, fully in control of the reproductive process, can serve as a useful mini-model for the generocentric argument, as it is structurally the same yet far
from abstract or remote. Our intuitions concerning the morality of child-bearing within the nuclear family are relatively clear and, I believe, support the generocentric thesis, which in this context can be called 'parento-centric.'

The generocentric approach grants a moral standing only to those who 'generate' population growth, excluding such a standing from those who are 'generated,' despite the fact that once they are 'generated' beings of this type are the same as their 'generators' and accordingly enjoy a moral status. In other words, decisions to enlarge the moral community are taken only 'from within' and in light of the rights, welfare, and interests of the original community. The other option, namely taking into account the innumerable possible sizes of the new enlarged community, leads to paradoxical conclusions.

Thus, when working within a utilitarian scheme, we can solve Parfit's puzzle by simply rejecting the logical legitimacy of comparisons between the welfare of a possible population A and a possible population B (when they consist of different people). It is true that the 'maximization principle' requires us not to conceive a defective child but rather wait and conceive a healthy one instead. But the very comparison of the welfare of the two possible children is based on the fallacious notion of an abstract, impersonal quantity of happiness in the world which should be maximized. This, as we shall see in the next section, is a mysterious, or even empty concept.

Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion (commending the promotion of total utility through large additions of people with gradually decreasing average happiness) may indeed be repugnant, but not because of the low standard of living of the new people in itself. For those people living in Parfit's repugnant world (Z), life is still worth living, and they would not complain for having been brought into it. Why should we, their progenitors, proscribe their existence? The only answer can be in terms of our interests. We cannot use them as a reason for not bringing them into the world. Nor can we appeal to that abstract hypothetical 'reservoir' of utility which calls for optimal growth. There simply is no such reservoir. To bring that point closer to intuition, consider the possibility that we, the present generation, live in a Z-world, and that in comparison with a smaller elitist happy population we are miserable. Does such a Gedankenexperiment have any implications as to the value of our existence, or the morality of our ancestors' demographic planning? Does it give anyone a basis for blaming our parents for having brought us into the world at all or, alternatively, for having created us instead of some other, slightly happier, persons?
The Obligation Principle or Extra Person Obligation are also based on the dubious impersonal hypothesis, and, like the maximizing principle, try to show that not only is it an obligation to prefer a happy possible person to an unhappy one, but that it is an obligation to bear a happy child **tout court**, or that it is wrong to prevent the birth of a happy person. This is sometimes supported by the transitivity argument:

(i) the procreation of a happy child is morally better than the procreation of a child who is neither happy nor unhappy.

(ii) the procreation of a child who is neither happy nor unhappy (or equally happy and unhappy) is morally equivalent to not procreating him.

(iii) the procreation of a happy child is morally better than abstaining from procreation.

The fallacy of this argument lies not only in the incommensurability of the value of life for the one child with its value for the other, but also in the absurdity of comparing the value of life (of whatever quality) with its complete absence. This latter point highlights the counter-intuitive aspects of the impersonal view of utilitarianism, and lends plausibility to the generocentric approach not only with regard to the question whether there is a moral obligation to continue the species at all, but also with regard to the choice who shall be born. For it seems that one cannot argue that there is an obligation to create a happy rather than a less happy child without also claiming that there is an obligation to create a child rather than not create one. Both are derived from the common impersonal grounds of the maximizing principle.

On this very point Narveson's approach to the ethics of procreation seems to be flawed. On the one hand he argues for a 'person-affecting' morality, i.e., a view which takes into moral consideration only the value of consequences of actions for (actual) persons. In this, my critique of impersonalism follows his forceful and convincing arguments. Yet, Narveson is reluctant to draw all the inevitable conclusions from his person-affecting view. Under the pressure of our intuitions regarding the asymmetry mentioned in the last section and that of Parfit's cases, Narveson concedes that although there is no obligation to bring a happy child into the world there is an obligation to postpone the conception of an unhappy child if by that a happier one will in fact be born. If we deliberate having a child, says Narveson, we are under an obligation to have the happiest possible. But to whom is this obligation owed, and on what grounds? Narveson fails to answer these questions and hence to show that “the person-regarding view can make [a] headway against Parfit's problem without also reverting to the
Impersonal account." Narveson is unwittingly led to impersonalism by allowing comparisons between the welfare of two different merely potential beings, which is logically exactly the same as comparing the existence of a potential being with its non-existence. Narveson argues for the asymmetry also by saying that while creating solvable problems is not obligatory, creating unsolvable ones is morally forbidden. But this again is inconsistent with a person-affecting theory as it presupposes the comparability of non-existence with life of a certain quality. My more radical generocentric (or parento-centric) approach allows, in a Genesis situation, only for considerations relating to the welfare and interests of existing persons (this generation, the parents). Excluding the welfare and interests of future merely possible persons may indeed in some cases be counter-intuitive, but it is a necessary consequence of a coherent person-regarding theory of value. I shall later suggest (section V) other empirical and indirect moral considerations that will show that Narveson could have avoided the concession to impersonalism without causing a flagrant clash with our intuitions.

So far we have discussed the generocentric solution for the puzzles raised by applications of utilitarianism to Genesis problems. But by avoiding impersonalism I believe that other puzzles mentioned in the previous section would also be dissipated. For a Kantian theorist only actual persons should be considered as ends in themselves. Respecting potential persons as ends is absurd and void; so is the extension of the Categorical Imperative to future potential persons. Begetting children can only be justified or rationalized in terms of our (the parents') interests and ideals. We can, therefore, treat our descendants only as means, although this is true only until they become actual, i.e., their existence becomes independent of our choice. After being born, they become ends, deserving of all due respect.

Looking at the procreation of children as a means of promoting the parents' interests may seem at first shocking, but is this not all there is to it? A typical decision procedure for planned parenthood never takes into account the interests of the child as an end in itself. It consists of reasons of various sorts: the prospects of a work-force in the family, the pleasure of the parents in having children, the potential benefit for existing (!) siblings, etc. These are all parento-centric reasons.

Only in extreme cases, when we know that the life of the extra child is likely to be of low quality, are our intuitions more Kantian and less parento-centric. Beyond a certain limit the use of procreation as a means for furthering our interests looks more like an immoral exploitation. This is the import of Kavka's example in which a child is
brought into the world to be sold as a slave or to donate a kidney to a sibling. This is certainly a difficult challenge to parento-centrism. One possible reply is that the parento-centric view prohibits the creation of a child who will later necessarily be treated as a means. The slave, unlike the typical case of family planning, is doomed to be of instrumental value, not only in his creation but throughout his life. And even if he would not mind it, and be ‘grateful’ for having been born, we would be forced to act immorally, which is a generocentric argument against begetting him.

The Rawlsian scheme also makes sense only in generocentric contexts and thus is incapable of dealing with a Genesis problem. It can at most provide principles of just savings and conservation for future people whose existence is ‘given,’ that is independent of our choice. Even the motivational assumption, ascribing benevolent feelings of parents towards their descendants, cannot explain why parents should beget children but only why they should take care of their (future) interests on the assumption that they exist (and in a certain independently determined number). The theory of justice typically represents a view of ethics as regulating and coordinating the behavior of actual people.

Religious ethics, on the other hand, seems to be of a more transcendent nature and accordingly more ambitious in its application to matters of procreation. The injunction “be fruitful and multiply!” is typically impersonal. So is the reasoning behind God's creation of the world and of man (“And He saw that it was very good”). But as we shall see in the next section, the impersonal conception of value is problematic, and its shift to a higher level does not necessarily solve the puzzles mentioned in the previous section. If it is good that there be human beings in the world (or more of them), for whom is it good? It must be for God Himself, for it cannot be for the non-existent, merely possible, creatures, and it cannot be good ‘for no one.’ Being the Creator of all value, God does not serve any impersonal, independent value. But then we are back at a generocentric ethics, in which God is guided by what is good for Him, and the further impersonal question, Is a world with God and human beings better than a world with no God and no human beings, remains unanswered. The concept of value underlying the generocentric view will be shown to be volitional — be it human volition or godly.

The generocentric approach casts doubts also on the puzzling utopistic, historicistic, and eugenic solutions to demographic problems. For even if we treat the continuation of the species, the progress of civilization, the completion of the human enterprise, as ideals which
transcend our life-span, they cannot be justified in terms of the impersonal value of these ideals, nor in terms of the interests and rights of future people. They can only be considered as a (late) realization of our projects, that is to say grounded generocentrically. However, even that justification looks paradoxical, for it is more natural to think that we want civilization to continue for future (actual) people than to say that we want future people to exist so as to continue civilization.

In the same vein, the generocentric view undermines the ‘trusteeship principle,’ according to which we, human beings, are only custodians or stewards of the planet whose existence is valuable independently of our existence. As there is no trans-human, metaphysical reason to keep the earth tidy or beautiful, it can be only the predicted interests of our descendants, on whose existence we have independently decided, that makes it wrong to deplete and pollute our surroundings. The same applies to the conservation and transmission of historical records and documents: historical truth is valuable for future generations; future people are not valuable as a means for the retention of historical truth.

Finally, the proposed generocentric view also avoids the paradoxes of identity (Parfit’s Different Number problem) and asymmetry (of the permission not to bring to life a happy child and the prohibition on bearing a miserable one). For it holds that there is a perfect symmetry between the two alternatives, not for reasons of impersonal utilitarianism (the maximizing principle) but for exactly the opposite ones: it is not that both alternatives are obligatory but rather that neither is. The apparent asymmetry only arises because generocentric or parento-centric reasoning usually tends to make the creation of miserable children irresponsible, irrational, burdensome to society, etc., while the conception of happy children, even when good from a generocentric point of view, is usually left to the discretion of the parents for reasons of personal autonomy. And by not taking into account the ‘interests of possible persons,’ generocentric ethics does not have to grapple with the impossible comparisons of the happiness of A in population x and that of B in population y.

IV. The Volitional Concept of Value

Can a most beautiful world be said to be (morally) better than an ugly one, independently of human awareness and appreciation? This is the subject of the famous debate between G.E. Moore and Sidgwick. Sidgwick confidently claims that all good — be it happiness, perfection, or excellence — must be of “Human Existence.” Objectivity of value
(beauty, goodness) is not existence independently of "any mind whatsoever," but the existence of a common standard "valid for all minds." Moore, no less passionately, argues for the comparability and hence superiority of the unpopulated beautiful world over the ugly one. but Moore concedes that his Thought-experiment is highly hypothetical and that as a matter of fact choices relating to the creation of valuable states of affairs are guided by their effects on human beings. Still, in the hypothetical case we are told that 'impersonal' preferences are perfectly rational.  

In that debate I side with Sidgwick. The generocentric view and the critique of impersonalism are grounded in an 'anthropocentric' conception of value according to which value is necessarily related to human interests, welfare, expectations, desires, and wishes — that is to say to human volitions. This is a conative or volitional concept of value, which on the moral level makes even more sense than on the aesthetic, though I believe — contra Moore — that it also aptly characterizes the latter.

The very existence of human beings, the fact that there is life on earth, is devoid of moral value. Life itself is only the arena in which values are created, judged and compared, though it can also be valuable as an object of human desire. On the other hand, the satisfaction of desires or the realization of ends and ideals is in itself, i.e. independently of individual beings who realize them, of no moral worth either. Moral value accrues only to the promotion of happiness of human beings, or to the realization of ideals by persons, or to the protection of rights of actual people. The fact that someone is born into the world does not add any moral worth to it, even if it can be shown that an extra amount of average or total utility has thus been added, or that more acts of justice and respect have thus been made possible. The only way to add moral worth is by raising the welfare of existing people, by my realization of my ideals, by improving the just institutions governing the lives of actual people, or by the perfection of the character of individuals. From the point of view of the volitional conception it is, strictly speaking, misleading to speak of the promotion of moral value 'in the world': there is no such abstract heap or reservoir to which we can or ought to contribute.

So, unlike the concept of truth, value (goodness) is necessarily related to human attributes, volitions, desires, and interests. Value is always for someone, although this need not always be an individual, nor should the value be of self-regarding or utilitarian nature. We can now see how the volitional conception of value is analytically related to the generocentric approach to the morality of population policy.
As life has value only in the sense that it is the condition of all value, it cannot be said abstractly that human existence is more valuable than non-existence, neither on the individual level nor on the collective level of the species. This would only be true if the fact that there is value in the world were in itself valuable. However, this does not seem plausible. The volitional concept of value does not allow us to say that the earth is 'better' in any sense than an unpopulated planet.

The volitional conception of value supports the generocentric and parento-centric solutions to the population problem by attacking the logical validity of impersonal value-judgements which transcend personal identity. Although I can be said to be happier than someone else who could have existed instead of me, it does not mean that my living is better than 'his' or that there are any moral consequences to the comparison. For the volition of a potential person is only hypothetical or potential and its realization cannot be considered a value in itself, whereas the volition of an existing being is already realized as a volition, and hence can be given a standing in the assessment, comparison, and distribution of welfare and rights.

But if individuals can have projects which extend to the future and require biological survival, cannot humanity as such have projects the realization of which requires the continuation of the species? The analogy is, I believe, based on a mistake.17 Humanity is not a super-person, an individual with personal identity. It cannot suffer or enjoy life; it has no projects beyond those of its individual members; it cannot be said to lose anything by being discontinued. In other words, it has no volitions of its own.

There remains the problem of assessing the very desire to have children. According to the view proposed here, we may want to have children for realizing our values, or want certain values for our children, but we cannot want to have children for their values or for no one's value (impersonalism). Paternalism in the procreative context is more radical than in the educational context. The parents do not only have an epistemic superiority over the children (knowing what is good for them), but actually decide the existence and identity of the children (which is constituted by the children's values, preferences, and character, over which the parents have an extensive control). Thus, we can justify our desire to have children in terms of values, as long as they are generocentrically based. Or, alternatively, we can paternalistically want our descendants to have certain values, while the decision to have them was motivated by independent forces (or was indeed not within our control). But we cannot justify procreation purely in terms of 'their' interests.
Finally, Nozick claims that valuing itself is a value, as are "value-seekers," because they "have a cosmic role: to aid in the realization of value, in the infusion of value into the material and human realm." This passage seems to imply that a populated world is superior to an unpopulated one, since only in the former is there an activity of valuing. But, again, it seems tautological to say that valuing is of value while the absence of valuing is a state of value-lessness. The question which must be asked is for whom? Valuing is of value only to value seekers! And there is no transcendent, non-human perspective from which valuing can be preferred to non-valuing. Even if we together with Nozick value the activity of valuing independently of its objects (i.e., the values), valuing is valuable only in relation to our essential nature as volitional beings. This interpretation seems to agree with a later comment in Nozick's book: "the choice that there be value is unguided by preexisting value standards." However, the former 'cosmic' and impersonal conception of value is not wholly consistent with the 'volitional' sense of the latter quotation.

The volitional conception of value cannot be strictly proven. It can only be suggested, as was done here. This is not an empirical issue, nor is it a semantic controversy about the correct analysis of the term 'value.' It is a conceptual problem which can be solved only within a theory, and it can be tested by the way it functions within a wider theory or the implications it has in various ethical and axiological problems (including aesthetics, as in the Moore-Sidgwick debate, and futurity problems of procreation, as discussed here).

V. Conclusions — Theoretical and Practical

Puzzles concerning certain (Genesis-like) aspects of the morality of procreation and population policy were shown to be solvable in terms of a generocentric approach. This approach was in turn shown to rest on a volitional conception of value. The conclusions of the proposed solution can be formulated on the three levels of moral discourse (section I).

On the pre-theoretical level the solution offers on the one hand new interpretations for existing intuitions (as in the asymmetry case) and on the other it calls for a revision of some intuitions (as in the case of the collective suicide of the species). On the ethical (theoretical) level generocentrism implies a limited application of some traditional ethical principles (such as the Categorical Imperative, the Golden Rule, and contractarian principles of justice), or their total rejection (as in the case
of the impersonal versions of utilitarianism). And on the meta-ethical level the inevitable conclusion seems to be that all value attached to the existence of future (potential) people, beyond that which is generocentrically based, cannot be of a moral nature (and it is doubtful whether it can be given any other kind of non-moral intrinsic value). Here lie the limits of ethics. And here is the theoretical usefulness of the futurity problem for meta-ethics: it points to the borderline of rational moral reasoning as if from the other side.

The generocentric approach has consequences which to some may sound counter-intuitive or indeed outrageous: We, the parents of the present generation, are complete masters over the existence and numbers of future people and we must consider only our values, interests, and ideals in deliberating population policies, eugenics, timing of conception, the size of the family, etc. Some imaginary cases such as Kavka’s slave-child or Parfit’s medical programs, or indeed the possibility of a collective suicide of humanity, seem to us so repugnant that the reflective equilibrium of the generocentric theory seems to become too shaky or unbalanced. Here some practical and theoretical considerations may help to re-establish the equilibrium or show that it was not really threatened in the first place.

First, the generocentric approach only deals with Genesis problems, or with the Genesis aspects of demographic planning. It applies only to cases of potential persons whose procreation is a matter of our choice. From the perspective of national or world population policies this is a highly idealized and hypothetical situation, since most of the world’s future population is not going to be born as a consequence of such a choice. However, child bearing in a nuclear family is much closer to the Genesis situation and I believe that our intuitions in that context are accordingly not really offended by generocentrism. And even when all the parents in the world will have access and control over the choice of their family’s size, there would still remain a moral problem on the collective level: the fact that I decide not to have children does not mean that I have no responsibility to conserve the earth’s resources for the children you decide to bear. This kind of moral responsibility is highly complex but typically intra-generational (between you and me). In that respect I have to consider the children who will be born into well-planned families as no less actual (‘given’) than children born into families having no means of birth control. This consideration involves very difficult problems of the distribution of the right (or duty) of procreation and of coordination. I shall not examine them here, but am aware that they point to the limit of the relevance of generocentrism.
Secondly, when we come to think in general terms we notice that begetting children is as a matter of fact among the most universal interests and cherished values of human beings, and therefore generocentric reasoning should lead to social arrangements which would guarantee the pursuit of this end and the welfare of those born as a consequence.

Thirdly, a transitive presentation of this deep interest in having children forces us to recognize that bearing children would most probably also be in the interest of our children (and theirs). As we wish our children good, we would try to guarantee them satisfactory conditions for bearing children.

Fourthly, in real life there are no clear-cut boundaries between generations. Generations overlap in various degrees. Thus, my concern for my contemporaries is partly that for the next generation, and vice versa. The partial overlap also means that not only can parents save for their children but children can save for their parents. This overlap can also be formulated transitively so as to extend to further generations, although in that case such an argument must allow for some form of a 'discount principle' (the further the generation, the less claim it has on us, and we on them).

Finally, the gradual suicide of humanity will be extremely painful, especially for those who are the last survivors on the planet; the painless, collective, simultaneous suicide seems to be technically a remote possibility. So even if human beings in general lost their particular interest in having children, other practical (egoistic) considerations would make suicide a generocentrically wrong decision.

These empirical observations are highly relevant because they serve to show that the repugnance of some conclusions is not due to generocentrism but rather to other reasons, and that our intuitions are formed in the light of those practical and empirical considerations. In other words, the reflective equilibrium of the generocentric approach can be saved by isolating those empirical variables.

The purpose of this article, therefore, was not to induce radical changes in our moral views on questions of procreation and conservation for future generations, but to point to a theoretical fallacy built into some of the standard (impersonal) justifications for those views. Generocentrism does not want us to become indifferent to the existence and quality of life of our children. It merely claims that our concern for them cannot be interpreted in impersonal terms.

And the more general lesson is drawn from the volitional concept of value underlying the generocentric approach. In the same way as physics
or even metaphysics cannot answer the question why there is something rather than nothing, but can only describe and explain what there is, so ethics cannot answer the question whether it is good or a duty that there be human beings, but can only determine what is good and right for human beings.

NOTES


2 For the repugnance of the implications of the total view, see D. Parfit, Reasons and Persons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), sections 130, 131. For the no less repugnant consequences of the average view, see B. Anglin, "The Repugnant Conclusion," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 7 (1977): 745-54. Anglin correctly claims that average utilitarianism is "impersonal" in the same way as the total version, but contrary to the view presented here he accepts impersonalism, and, unlike Parfit, denies the repugnance of the Repugnant Conclusion.

3 And as H. Vetter elegantly shows, non-procreation should always be preferred to the procreation of a child who might be unhappy. "Utilitarianism and New Generation," Mind 80 (1971): 301-2. Negative Utilitarians might be led to a painless collective suicide of the human race as the optimal means of reducing pain, which is another paradox of impersonalism.

4 Rawls discusses the subject in section 44 of his A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971). C. Hubin shows how Rawls' own solution (plus the "motivational assumption") leads to the 'reduction' of obligation toward future generations to that toward contemporaries. On that point my own solution will be seen as agreeing with his, although Hubin is not interested in the Genesis problem but rather in a savings policy. See "Justice and Future Generations," Philosophy and Public Affairs 6 (1976/7): 70-83.


7 In the above-mentioned essay Partha Dasgupta also rejects impersonalism when he rejects the ranking of alternative worlds independently of actual persons. But he shies away from a fully generocentric solution when he seems to give some weight to future generations. I also cannot accept Dasgupta's moral imperative that there be future people, which, besides, is inconsistent with his own skepticism about optimum ranking of different solutions to population policies.

8 On similar grounds Parfit's paradox of Mere Addition should be rejected: B cannot be better than A+ because the very comparison between different people (be they equal in number or not) is impossible. Parfit, Reasons and Persons, ch. 19.


13 Extending the Golden Rule to potential people (as done by Hare), ascribing to them rights (thus implying a prohibition on chastity), is based on the paradoxical personalization of sheer potentialities. This idea is hilariously developed in the sperm-parachutist scene in Woody Allen's Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex.


15 I owe this suggestion to Alon Harel.


17 This mistaken and misleading analogy is offered by G. Kavka in "The Futurity Problem," in the Sikora and Barry collection, p. 197.


19 Ibid., p. 565.

20 Even Parfit is willing to admit that overpopulation is bad because it leads to famine and war and harms our self-interest, i.e., that there are sufficient generocentric arguments against it.

21 This difficult metaphysical problem has of course been widely discussed, especially by theologians. For a non-religious attempt to answer the question, see J. Leslie, "Ethically Required Existence," American Philosophical Quarterly 9 (1972): 215–25. However, I have immense difficulties in understanding Leslie's idea that the existence of the world is "ethically required."