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Does Low Fertility Rate Have Ethical Dimensions?

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Abstract

The man's position in the world is constantly changing and morality should also change simultaneously. Applied ethics could help the moral evaluation of new technology, customs or the social phenomenon. According to the public opinion of the western world, a decision about having children is an essentially private one. A new problem appeared: the very low fertility rate, which is characteristic for a number of countries in Europe and East Asia. This demographic crisis obligatory leads to ageing and population decline ceteris paribus. Therefore, the question arises whether there is a need for re-evaluating this problem from moral point of view.

Keywords

Applied ethics; conscious and responsible reproduction; rule-utilitarianism; Hans Jonas

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I. The changing world and the applied ethics

Man's position in the world is constantly changing and morality should also change simultaneously.¹ Initially, moral changes were very slow. For traditional communities, changes are impossible to observe, so they feel entitled to consider that the moral standing and moral rules are chiselled in stone. Starting from the Renaissance, moral changes have accelerated in the Western world. Changes are taking place on two levels: on the one hand, changes of the specific moral rules, on the other hand, changes of the guiding principles and moral values. For example, cruelty to animals (or animal abuse) is not morally acceptable today, but it was in the past. Table 1 provides some additional examples for new rules and moral principles.

Table 1. Some examples of new rules and moral principles to appear.

New moral rules	New moral values and principles	Representative books
Protection of individual freedom	Freedom, autonomy	Harriet Beecher Stowe: Uncle Tom's Cabin 1852; J.S. Mill: On Liberty 1859;
Sexual revolution	Sexual liberation	Giovanni Boccaccio: Decameron, 1470; Sigmund Freud: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality 1905; D. H. Lawrence: Lady Chatterley's lover 1928;
Women's rights	Feminism	Virginia Woolf: Three Guineas 1938; Simone de Beauvoir: The Second Sex 1949;
Animal welfare	Animals have intrinsic value	Peter Singer: Animal liberation 1975;
Using of renewable resources;	Sustainability	Our Common Future (Brundtland Report) 1987;

There may be situations where these principles collide with each other. In my opinion, fertility is an issue which may present conflict between individual freedom and sustainability. I do not think it is the correct solution to ignore one of the fundamental values, but we could look for a moral compromise between these contradictory values.

The applied ethics has an important role in changing ethics. It could help the moral evaluation of new technology, customs or social phenomenon. Applied ethics is a philosophical examination, from a moral standpoint, of particular issues in private and public life that are matters of moral judgment. It attempts to use philosophical methods to identify the morally correct course of action in various fields of human life. In conclusion the applied ethics should reflect the results of sciences and develop ethical position; furthermore it should explore the moral principles. Science examines issues objectively, using descriptive statement about what "is". Questions referring to "is" are objective and therefore the scientific debate can be finished relatively easily. However, in ethics including applied ethics the task is more difficult, that is, we should add moral values and ratings (good, bad, right wrong) to these special situations. Unlike Hume, the applied ethics frequently tries to derive "ought" from "is."² So, the concept of "Hume's laws" should be rejected. Unfortunately, the questions of "ought to be" which inherently have subjective nature can be debated continuously and almost endlessly.

Generally, the applied ethics investigates the new social phenomenon on utilitarian bases. According to this human behaviour and practice which causes more disadvantages than advantages for

¹ Paul Bloom, "How do morals change?" in *Nature* Vol. 464, 490 (25 March 2010). online doi: 10.1038/464490a.

² David Hume, *A Treatise of human Nature* (London: NuVision Publications, 2007), 335.

those affected is morally wrong. The utilitarian judging of individual behaviour is always difficult. The rule-utilitarianism examines the rule and not the individual act from a utilitarian point of view.

Let us take the use of DDT for example. Since Carson's time (1962) we know that the use of DDT causes very serious ecological and human damages.³ Afterwards, the use of DDT was rejected by the human community because natural and social disadvantages outweigh the advantages. In this case the individual and short-term benefits collide with the collective and long-term disadvantages. The sustainability issues are also characterized by the collision of short-term benefits and long-term disadvantages. One of the important features of sustainability ethics is that it examines the long-term effects of human behaviour.

So the human behaviour, which is harmful in the long run and is unsustainable, is usually unacceptable from the moral point of view. At the same time there may be exceptions. For example, there may be such aspects of human rights in the case of which the community would rather take a long-term disadvantage. Finally, I would like to underline that new moral rules are not always accompanied by bureaucratic regulations. For example, selective collection of waste is generally recognized as moral behaviour, but it is not associated with bureaucratic coercion.

II. A new problem: low fertility rate

There appeared a new problem, that is low fertility rate, which is characteristic for a number of countries in the developed world. Many people would be surprised to know that over the past three decades, fertility rates have plummeted in many parts of the world, including China, Japan and even significant regions of India. These Asian giants are not alone. In much of Europe, East Asia and elsewhere, the average number of children born has fallen to unprecedentedly low levels.

Like other facets of globalization, low fertility rates are by no means universal: high fertility persists in sub-Saharan Africa and in parts of the Middle East, but elsewhere low fertility is more the rule than the exception. These underlying trends in childbearing mean that in the near future the rate of population growth both in Europe and Asia are likely to decline. Thirty years ago only a small fraction of the world's population lived in the few countries with fertility rates substantially below the "replacement level." Nowadays roughly 60 percent of the world's population are living in countries with below-replacement fertility rates.⁴

We can read about the concept of "underpopulation bomb."⁵ As Folbre (2013) writes „*The birth dearth/empty cradle/baby bust is upon us, threatening consequences just as dire as the overpopulation bomb* that Paul Ehrlich predicted would cause mass global starvation in the 1970s. ... This dire prophecy of underpopulation has gradually made its way from the pages of Foreign Policy to The New York Times and, most recently, The Wall Street Journal.”⁶

I am going to use the concept of overpopulation and underpopulation from demographic point of view, that is, these concepts only refer to the rapid population growth and decline. The concept of "underpopulation bomb" suggests that this process is bad and demolishing therefore it is unacceptable by morality. So the empirical question is: can we use this term correctly or not? This study examines whether there are ethical implications of low fertility rate. The essence of this phenomenon is that the statistical average of newborn children is not sufficient for the replacement fertility rates.

III. Demographical considerations

In 1950 only 2.5 billion people lived on the Earth, and this number doubled in less than 40 years. The number of people reached 7 billion in 2011 and according to the predictions this number will reach 10

³ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Houghton Mifflin, Mariner Books, 1962/2002), chapter 3, pp. 15-37.

⁴ Michael S. Teitelbaum, Michael S. Winter, *The Global Spread of Fertility Decline: Population, Fear, and Uncertainty*. (Yale University Press, 2013). 1-39.

⁵ K. Kelly, "What "should" we be worried about? The Underpopulation Bomb." in *Edge.org* 2013 <https://edge.org/response-detail/23722> (accessed December 11, 2015).

⁶ F. Nancy, "The Underpopulation Bomb." *The New York Times. Economix*. February 11, 2013. 6:00 AM <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/11/the-underpopulation-bomb/> (accessed December 11, 2015).

billion in 2083.⁷ During this period the fertility rate significantly decreased. A statistical average woman had almost 5 children in the fifties, while this value decreased to 3 children in the nineties. The decrease of fertility rate corresponds to the final phase of the demographic transition.

Demography is a scientific study of human population including the changes in population size. The components of change of the total population are birth, death and migrations. Birth rate and immigration increase the size of the population. Death rate and emigration decrease the size of the population. To determine whether there has been population change, the following formula is used: $(\text{birth rate} + \text{immigration}) - (\text{death rate} + \text{emigration})$.

We'll limit our attention to birth rate. One of its main parameters is *crude birth rate* which shows the number of birth per 1000 people. Another important concept is the *fertility rate* which has several forms. Age-specific fertility rate shows the number of births 1000 woman in the same age group. General fertility rate refers to the average number of births per 1000 women aged 15-49. *Total fertility rate* (RTF) shows the average number of births per woman per lifetime. There is a strong correlation between the number of births and total fertility rate. The high birth rate means high fertility rate and vice versa.

The value of total fertility rate could be high, that of replacement-level, low and very low. There is a *high fertility*, if total fertility levels are above 5 children per woman. If every woman has two daughters in the statistical average, that is, if TFR = 4 children/woman, the number of every new generation will be duplicated. It means exponential grows. „Exponential growth occurs when the increase in population size in a given period is a constant percentage of the size at the beginning of the period.”⁸

The concept of *replacement-level fertility* may seem relatively simple, it means the level of fertility required to ensure a population replacing itself in size. To replace themselves women, on average, need to have one female child, who survives long enough for a female grandchild to be born, and so on for succeeding generations.⁹ An average of two children will ‘replace’ all mothers and fathers, but only if the same number of boys and girls are born and all female children survive to the end of reproductive age. However, mortality and the unbalanced sex ratio at birth mean that replacement level fertility is actually a little higher. In the developed countries the rate of 2.1 children per women is considered to be the replacement fertility rate.

We can speak about the sub-replacement fertility or low fertility rate if total fertility levels are below 2.1 children per woman. There is very low fertility, if total fertility levels are below 1.3 children per woman. If TFR = 1 child/woman, that is, if every woman has only 0.5 daughter in the statistical average, the number of every new generation will be divided into a half. This means exponential decrease.

Nowadays, the fertility rate of 2.5 children/woman regarding to the whole mankind means that the expected population will be 9.4 billion in 2050, that is a 1.3 times increase.¹⁰ It can be surprising at the first sight that despite fertility rate decrease the number of people is still quickly increasing. The reasons of this tendency can be that (i) the mortality rate decrease was even faster; and (ii) the number of fertile women in connection with earlier high fertility rate is higher, so more and more women have less and less children; and (iii) the fertility rate of 2.5 is still absolutely high.

The literature uses the concept of population momentum in this regard. Population momentum is the tendency for population to continue to grow even after replacement-level fertility has been achieved. It is caused by a relatively high concentration of people in their childbearing years - that is, by a population that is age-biased toward youth. It takes a period of time equal to the average life expectancy (approximately three generations) for a reduction in fertility to be manifested as a change in actual population number. For example, U.S. fertility first dropped to slightly below replacement level fertility in 1972. Because of population momentum, however, U.S. population would continue to increase to 255 million by 2020 - without any additional immigration - and then would gradually

⁷ <http://geography.about.com/od/obtainpopulationdata/a/worldpopulation.htm> (accessed December 11, 2015).

⁸ Paul R. Ehrlich & Anne H. Ehrlich, *The Population Explosion* (Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, 1990), 265.

⁹ J. Craig, “Replacement level fertility and future population growth,” in *Population Trends* 78 (1994): 20–22.

¹⁰ Population Reference Bureau. *World Population Data Sheet*. 2014. http://www.prb.org/pdf14/2014-world-population-data-sheet_eng.pdf (accessed December 11, 2015).

decline.¹¹ It is therefore crucial that this time delay be considered when targeting future population numbers. Any attempt to achieve a population stabilization must consider the long-term impact of birth rates.¹²

This high fertility rate (2.5 children/woman) average covers significant regional differences. The fertility rate on the continents (and the expected population growth) can be listed in decreasing order: Africa: 4,7 children/woman (2,1x increase to 2050); Oceania: 2,4 children/woman (1,6x); Asia: 2,2 (1,2x); America: 2,1 (1,3x) and Europe: 1,6 children/woman (1x).¹³

These data show that Africa is still in the period of fast population growth (*demographical transition*). This is the primary reason of the population growth of the entire mankind. In terms of sustainability the doubling population of Africa till 2050 is alarming in spite of the fact that the ecologic footprint of African people is much less than the ecologic footprint of people in other continents. The expected population growth of Oceania with 39 million people is above the world average, at the same time its demographic and environmental importance is minimal. From the fertility rate point of view, Asia and America are just in the ideal state. According to the fertility rate, Europe is in serious demographical crisis (*second demographical transition*), however, its expected population does not change until 2050. The constant population can be explained by the population momentum, decreasing mortality, the increasing migration and the ageing of the society.

Therefore, it is misleading to concentrate only on the world average of fertility rate. Obviously, it is incorrect to say that statistically the average man consumes too much so the consumption has to be decreased everywhere, in Africa, as well. Similarly, it is also incorrect to say that statistically the fertility rate of the average man is too high so the fertility rate has to be decreased everywhere, in Europe, as well. From the demographic point of view, mankind consists of very different communities which are taken into consideration.

The model of *demographical transition* shows population change over time, how birth rate and death rate affect the total population of a country. This model has five stages. (i) High stationary stage (disease, food shortages, natural disasters) where the birth and death rates are both very high (35- 40 per thousand). This phase is characterized by the slow population growth in all human populations up to the late 18th century. (ii) Early expanding stage (gap between death and birth rates) where the death rate declines while the birth rate remains high and there is a rapid rise in population growth ("population explosion"). The decline in the death rate in Europe began in the late 18th. century. Many developing countries entered this phase in the second half of the 20th century. (iii) Late expanding stage where the gap between birth and death rates narrows due to decline in birth rates. Total population is still rising, but the growth begins to slow down. (iv) Low stationary stage where the death rate and birth rate remain low. Population remains fairly stable, the growth is slow. This model is called the *first demographic transition*. (v) Declining stage where the birth rate keeps decreasing which results a negative population growth. This phase is called the *second demographic transition*.

There is a significant difference between the two forms of demographic crises from two points of view. On one hand, in case of overpopulation crisis a spontaneous decrease of high fertility is expected, which is in accord with the last phase of the demographic transition.¹⁴ However, the spontaneous increase of fertility rate cannot be expected during the underpopulation crisis. As a result, this problem can be treated only with conscious activity. On the other hand, in Europe, where the too low fertility rate causes problems, reproduction is fully the result of conscious behaviour. Consequently, the moral regulation of reproductive behaviour is not only necessary, but it is also possible. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the significant part of the population earns less than 1.25 dollar per day, reproductive behaviour is partly conscious so the moral regulation of reproduction is only possible in a limited extent.

¹¹ J. Craig, "Replacement level fertility and future population growth." *Population Trends* 78 (1994): 20-22.

¹² <http://www.cairco.org/reference/fertility-and-population-momentum> (accessed December 11, 2015).

¹³ Population Reference Bureau, 2014. World Population Data Sheet. http://www.prb.org/pdf14/2014-world-population-data-sheet_eng.pdf

¹⁴ Donella H. Meadows, Jorgen Randers and Dennis L. Meadows, *Limits to Growth. The 30 year Update*. (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004). Chapter 2.3 p. 51 (in Hungarian translation, Kossuth Kiadó, Budapest 2005).

There have been a number of explanations for the general decline in fertility rates in much of the world, and the true explanation is almost certainly a combination of different factors. These are: economic development, urbanization, secularization, higher education, conscious birth control, changing of female social role, partnership instability, economic and career benefits of childless life.

If the low fertility trend is sustained (and not compensated by immigration) it results in *population ageing* and *population decline*. This is forecast for most of the countries of Europe and East Asia. Population ageing is the case for every country in the world except the 18 countries designated as “demographic outliers” by the UN.¹⁵ For the entirety of recorded human history, the world has never seen as aged a population as currently exists globally.¹⁶

IV. Altered nature of reproduction

Several authors (Ellul, Hardin, Daly) have pointed out that man’s relation to nature is basically different today from the way it was in the past. This thought is central in Jonas (1984).¹⁷ He connects it with the ‘altered nature of human action’. Jonas argues that in its entire history the human race has never been in the position that modern technology now places it in. The nature of human action has changed due to the use of new technology. So while the technology of the past was an instrument to mediate between man and his environment, modern technology has become a reality on its own. Modern technologies have become powerful. Man with modern technology now dominates the entire ecosphere in monumental ways. Jonas’s axiom is that responsibility is a correlate of power. The ancient man-nature relations was not characterized by technological power therefore the old, narrow scope or “neighbour” ethics was satisfactory. Jonas called it the ethics of here and now. The modern technology and the old ethics result in a critical situation which can best be characterized as an *ethical vacuum*. Therefore the modern technology needs a new and modern ethics.

We can talk about “altered nature of human action” in the case of reproduction, as well. At the dawn of history, sexuality and reproduction formed natural unity which could not be controlled by man. Reproduction was not the result of conscious decision, but it was the natural consequence of the sexual act. However, the circumstances of high fertility and high mortality ensure the survival of human communities and biological evolution. As a result, reproduction – similarly to respiration – was not part of morality, so it was an amoral event. Without contraception a woman has 7 children in statistical average.¹⁸ It did not cause a problem because mortality was also high. The continuous reduction in mortality is a key feature of the human civilization. At the same time fertility control would be necessary.

After having reproductive connections been understood, people and community tried to influence their reproductive behaviour. The growth of population and the birth rate were generally limited by the hunter-gatherer societies. The traditional contraceptive methods including infanticide and abortion were accepted by the community.

The first contraceptive pill was introduced in 1960, by which women take charge over their reproductive cycle. The sexual revolution was consolidated by the spreading of modern contraceptive methods. As a result of this process, sex and reproduction broke free from the naturalistic processes. Statistical data about the extent of contraceptive usage are available. In the world, 63% of the fertile women (15-49 years), who live in marriage or cohabitation, use all kinds of contraceptive method, 56% of these women use modern method of contraception (such as pill, intra uterine device, condom and sterilization). These data are 70 and 60% in the developed world, while they are 36 and 30% in the poorest world. In the application of contraceptive methods, the highest rates are observed in Eastern

¹⁵ Human Development Report 2005. http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/266/hdr05_complete.pdf (accessed December 11, 2015).

¹⁶ United Nations Population Division. World Population Ageing: 1950-2015. <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldageing19502050/> (Accessed December 11, 2015).

¹⁷ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). chapter1, pp.1-24.

¹⁸ Massimo Livi-Bacci, *A világ népességének rövid története*. [Short History of World Population] (Budapest: Osiris kiadó, 1999), 29.

Asia (82/81) and Northern Europe (80/78), while Western Africa (17/11) and Central Africa (18/8) show the lowest rates.¹⁹

In the developed world, the high rate of contraception (70-80%) actually means that women's reproductive behaviour became conscious. After all, if women consciously do not want children, they use contraceptive methods. When they consciously want children, they do not use contraceptive methods. Nevertheless, the low rate of contraception in the developing world (36%) – taking the high fertility rate into account – raises further questions. What is the cause of the low rate in contraception if there are free and low-cost methods? One of the possible explanations is that in these regions women want many children and therefore, they hardly use contraceptive methods consciously. The other possible explanation is that under these circumstances, women have no capacity (money, attention, potential) to regulate their reproductive processes consciously.

It can be stated that reproductive behaviour is directed consciously almost all over the world. All conscious behaviour, so conscious reproduction, can be regulated by means of morality. It would be needed because the present reproductive practice is not sustainable. It has fundamentally different forms such as overpopulation and underpopulation. In the poorest regions of the world (primarily in Africa), population grows quickly (in some cases exponentially). The primary cause is the very high fertility rate. Contrary to this trend, the European population ages and population declines. The primary cause is the very low fertility rate.

According to the Jonas (1984) terminology, we are currently in a moral vacuum considering reproduction. Man is already dominating his own reproduction in technological sense, but has not yet faced its dangers. Since most people do not want to give up mastery of reproduction, there is no other solution than the ethical and responsible exercise of power.

V. Ethical considerations about the low fertility rate

There are many different positions formulated considering reproduction and fertility rate in the history of ideas. The following are the most important.

(Religious position) Agriculture gives an opportunity to increase the population and birth rate. Religion refuses the human control over reproduction. Christianity and the other world religions reject most forms of contraception and encourage couples to take on a lot of children. “*God blessed them; and God said to them, »Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it;«*”²⁰ Therefore, sexual relationship is only possible in marriage, the purpose of sex is reproduction and contraception is prohibited. It is an absolute ethical command to be followed in each case, no matter the circumstances: carrying capacity, infant mortality rates, population density etc. This command fits well with the old conditions: natural course of reproduction, high infant mortality, low population density, ecological abundance etc. So, this situation is characterized by a first phase of demographic transition.

(Malthusianism) Firstly, Thomas Malthus (1798) a British priest and economist called attention to the dangers and risks of the population growth (overpopulation).²¹ He argued that population tends to increase faster than food supply. Population increases in geometrical (exponential) progression: e.g. 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256. Food supply increases in arithmetical (linear) progression: e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. Imbalance leads to overpopulation corrected by positive checks: misery, war, famine, floods, etc. and preventive checks: moral restraint, late marriage, chastity, and apply criminal punishment for those who have more children than they can support etc.²²

Such a high fertility rate currently characterizes only a few Sub-Sahara countries. This high fertility leads to overpopulation in the case of decreasing mortality. Neo-Malthusianism may be used as a label for those who are concerned that overpopulation may increase resource depletion or environmental

¹⁹ Population Reference Bureau 2014 Worlds Population Date Sheet. http://www.prb.org/pdf14/2014-world-population-data-sheet_eng.pdf

²⁰ Genesis 1:28, Bible.

²¹ T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet and Other Writers* (London: Penguin, 1798/1970). Chapter 2. pp.6 – 11.

²²<http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/notes/malthusian-theory-of-population-criticisms-and-its-applicability/39642/> (Accessed December 11, 2015).

degradation to a degree that is not sustainable with the potential of ecological collapse or other hazards. Most environmentalists think about demographic issues such as Malthus and Neo-Malthusianism.²³ Neo-Malthusianism encourages people not to have more children. It is an absolute ethical command to be followed in each case, no matter the circumstances, e.g. one child policy in China.

(*Reproductive rights*) In the mainstream of modern secular thinking, sexuality and reproduction have grown into private affairs as the Proclamation of Teheran states. "Parents have a basic human right to *determine* freely and *responsibly* the number and the spacing of their children;"²⁴ The Bucharest Conference on the World Population held in August 1974 endorsed the same view: The Plan of Action that: „all couples and individuals have the basic human right to *decide* freely and *responsibly* the number and the spacing of their children and to have the information, education, and means to do so."

The World Health Organization defines reproductive rights as follows: "Reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to *decide* freely and *responsibly* the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. They also include the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence."²⁵ It is an important question what we mean by „determine ... responsibly" or "decide ... responsibly" in these statements. Two interpretations are possible: *narrow* (or liberal), *wide* (or communitarian).

The responsibility of parents is connected to family planning only for the child to be born and raised. Family planning has nothing to do with community and society. Family planning is a private and *morally neutral decision* like having a pet. According to this interpretation, having children has moral content, because the parent has a moral responsibility towards the children already born. However, this responsibility does not extend to the issue of having children. So the liberal position is not denying that having children is a responsible decision. From liberal point of view, the responsible decision of parents is to take a child or any children if they are able to assume the responsibilities involved.

Population ethics or population axiology standing on liberal bases is the philosophical study of the ethical problems concerning populations including total and average utilitarianism, mere addition paradox, repugnant conclusion and person affecting view.²⁶ A *person-affecting view* in population ethics captures the intuition that an act can only be bad if it is bad *for* someone.²⁷ Similarly something can be good only if it is good *for* someone. A weaker form of person-affecting views states that an act can only be bad if it is bad for some existing or future person.²⁸

There is no single "person-affecting view" but rather a variety of formulations all involving the idea of something being good or bad *for* someone. Gustaf Arrhenius (2003) formulates the "person-affecting restriction" saying that moral claims "necessarily involve a reference to humans," so that statements only referring to "the scenery" or "the balance of the ecosystem" (without reference to humans) are excluded from moral consideration. Of course, the environmentalists reject this view. Nick Beckstead (2013) also distinguishes between *moderate* and *strict* person-affecting views, where

²³ John Ebergbulam Njoku, *Malthusianism: An African Dilemma – Hunger, Drought and starvation in Africa*. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 181.

²⁴ Proclamation of Teheran. *Final Act of the International Conference on Human Rights*, Teheran, 22 April to 13 May 1968, U.N. Doc. A/CONF. 32/41 at 3 (1968). <https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instrree/12ptichr.htm> (accessed December 11, 2015).

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reproductive_rights (accessed December 11, 2015).

²⁶ Gustaf Arrhenius, "The Person-Affecting Restriction, Comparativism, and the Moral Status of Potential People." *Ethical Perspectives* 10 (2003) 3-4, 186. <http://www.iffs.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The-Person-Affecting-Restriction-Comparativism-and-the-Moral-Status-of-Potential-People.pdf> (accessed December 11, 2015).

²⁷ M. A. Roberts, "The Nonidentity Problem," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonidentity-problem/> (accessed December 11, 2015).

²⁸ Nick Beckstead, *On the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future*. PhD Thesis. Department of Philosophy, Rutgers University. 2013.

moderate views give less weight to "extra" people while strict views do not consider "extra" people at all.

According to the *wide (or communitarian) interpretation of responsibility* the family planning has social aspect, as well. This means that couples and individuals should concern the reproductive position of the community. Such concepts as overpopulation and underpopulation refer to this position. So, family planning is not only a private *decision*.

(*Rule-utilitarianism*) Utilitarianism is one of the best known and most influential moral theories. Its core idea is that whether actions are morally right or wrong depends on their effects. More specifically, the only effects of actions that are relevant are the good and bad results that they produce. It is important to make a distinction between individual actions and types of actions. Act utilitarians focus on the effects of individual actions (e.g. assassination of Abraham Lincoln) while rule utilitarians focus on the effects of types of actions (e.g. killing or stealing). Both act utilitarians and rule utilitarians say that our aim in evaluating actions should be to create the best results possible, but they do not agree in the way of doing it. Act utilitarians believe that whenever we are deciding what to do, we should perform the action that will create the greatest net utility. In their view, the principle of utility should be applied on different cases. The right action in any situation is the one that yields more utility (i.e. creates more well-being) than other actions.²⁹

Rule utilitarians adopt a two part view that stresses the importance of moral rules. According to rule utilitarians, a) a specific action is morally justified if it conforms to a justified moral rule; and b) a moral rule is justified if its inclusion into our moral code would create more utility than other possible rules (or no rule at all). According to this perspective, we should judge the morality of individual actions by reference to general moral rules, and we should judge particular moral rules, as well. Rule utilitarians believe that we can maximize utility only by setting up a moral code that contains rules. The correct moral rules are those whose inclusion in our moral code will produce better results (more well-being) than other possible rules. The principle of utility is used to evaluate rules and is not applied directly to individual actions. Once the rules are determined, compliance with these rules provides the standard for evaluating individual actions.³⁰

Let's apply rule utilitarianism to this demographical problems. It is clear that the applicable rule depends on the demographic situation of the community. The right rule of behaviour for a member of a growing population is to have maximum 2 children, while for that of decreasing population to have minimum 2 children. Therefore, the "golden rule" is to have generally 2 children per person. In this case the community can avoid the problem of rapid population increase or decrease. It is another problem whether the stable population is sustainable from ecological point of view. It is certain that a fast-growing or decreasing population is unsustainable from demographical point of view.

(*Jonas's concept*) If the fertility rate of mankind were the same in every community, the situation would be much simpler from moral point of view. We might say rightly that if the fertility rate were ideal in every community, there would be no need for moral regulation. In contrast, the uniformly too high or too low fertility rate leading to result overpopulation or underpopulation obviously endangers the human survival. In this case it is easier to argue that either the too high or too low fertility rate is morally wrong because it threatens the survival of all mankind.

The very low fertility rate of the humankind obviously leads to the extinction of human race. For example if the birthrate remains at 1.19 children per woman, South Korea could face natural extinction by 2750. The decline in population, of course, will cause serious problems much sooner in reality.

Jonas considers that the possibility of the extinction of the humankind is the most evil (summum malum). He calls for a new ethics which can prevent the occurrence of the most evil. Jonas elaborates a new ultimate ethical maxim of all human actions: "*Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life;*" or expressed negatively "*Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life.*"³¹

According to Jonas, the survival of mankind means the ultimate moral principle which has an absolute nature demonstrated by him with metaphysical arguments. Jonas is aware of the fact that for mankind there is a possibility of existence and non-existence, as well. However, this does not mean

²⁹ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/util-a-r/> (accessed December 11, 2015).

³⁰ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/util-a-r/> (accessed December 11, 2015).

³¹ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 11.

that we can equate these two options and that we can be indifferent. For Jonas indifference is equal with nihilism and he rejects it. Non-existence is possible for humanity but humanity ought to exist. Thus, we have to get to the categorical moral claim that human beings must exist. For Jonas this is the only moral call which fits the Kantian imperative thanks to the empirical fact that we do exist. This is a categorical (unconditional) claim that is due to the mere empirical existence. At this point new duty and obligation appear, namely the obligation of existence and the prohibition of taking over the risk of existence of humanity.³²

Currently, however, the fact is that too high and too low fertility rates characterize humanity at the same time. In other words overpopulation and underpopulation simultaneously characterize the different human communities. Unfortunately, very low fertility rate of a community in the absence of immigration will inevitably lead to extinction of the community while high immigration leads to substantial transformation of the community. If the extinction or fundamental transformation of mankind is the most moral evil, it logically follows that the extinction or fundamental transformation of some human communities is also morally wrong. This process reduces the diversity and cultural richness of mankind.

VI. Conclusion

The nature of human reproduction is constantly changing. At the dawn of history, sexuality and reproduction formed natural unity which could not be controlled by man. So human reproduction was an amoral process. The nature of human reproduction has changed due to the use of new contraceptive methods. As a result of this process, sex and reproduction broke free from the naturalistic processes. It can be stated that reproductive behaviour is directed consciously almost all over the world. All conscious behaviour, so conscious reproduction, can be regulated by means of morality. So the new contraceptive methods need a new ethics.

Nowadays, the fertility rate of 2.5 children/woman regarding to the whole mankind. This high fertility rate average covers significant regional differences. According to the fertility rate, Africa (4,7 children/woman) and Europe (1,6 children/woman) are in serious demographical crisis. Therefore, it is misleading to concentrate only on the world average of fertility rate. From the demographic point of view, mankind consists of very different communities which are taken into consideration.

The old ethical concepts (religion, Malthusianism, liberalism) are dogmatic and inappropriate. These are absolute ethical commands to be followed in each case, no matter the circumstances: fertility rate, population ageing, density etc.

Religion refuses the human control over reproduction. Religion encourages people to have more children. There are two serious problems with the religious concept. (i) Modern people, including the majority of religious people, as well also want to control their own reproductive processes. (ii) Religion has no solution for the problem of overpopulation.

Firstly, Thomas Malthus called attention to the dangers of the population growth (overpopulation). Malthusianism encourages people not to have more children. Unfortunately, Malthusianism does not give a solution for the problem of underpopulation.

The liberal interpretation of reproductive rights is a perfect solution for the community where reproduction processes are ideal. This is typical for Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g. Australia TFR=1.9; Ireland TFR=2.0; New-Zeland TFR=2.0; United Kingdom TFR= 1.9; United States TFR= 1.9 children/woman). However this conception does not give a solution for the demographic crisis, including fertility crisis, either overpopulation in Africa or underpopulation in Europa.

Following answer can be given in the question of title. The ethical judgment of the low individual fertility depends on the demographic position of the community. If the demographic position of the community is good (replacement-level fertility), individual fertility has no ethical dimension. However, the demographic situation of the community is bad (too low or high), low individual fertility has ethical dimension. In the communities, where the total fertility rate is too low, there low individual

³² Teresa Levy, "Philosophical ethics meets technology: a difficult state of affairs." in *Global Bioethics-Special issue*, ed. C. Susanne (Dedicada ao Módulo Europeu de Bioética, 1997), chapter 2.1 pp. 76-83 (in Hungarian translation: Dialóg Campus, Budapest, 1999)

fertility means immoral behaviour. While in the community where total fertility is too high, low individual fertility means moral behaviour.

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