Philosophy, the Environment and Population Policy

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What have and what can philosophers contribute to the debate on population and the environment? I don’t think there can be any other discipline where it is more difficult to answer this question. While other disciplines have rival schools of thought, philosophy is the discipline people turn to when they can no longer take for granted a shared framework of assumptions underlying their disagreements. Consequently, it is a discipline riven by diversity of viewpoints, not only on what is the answer to any question, but also on what questions should be asked, how questions should be posed, how they should be answered and how proposed answers should be defended. Philosophers even disagree on what is a question. Perusing the papers written by philosophers on population policy confirms this state of affairs.

What I would like to argue is that this is one of the things which make philosophy so valuable. But how can I argue this when presenting a range of disparate arguments by philosophers about different aspects of population policy? I could simply ignore those arguments I disagree with, but this would be uninformative. So, instead, I will begin with an account of the work of some of the more conventional philosophers. These are the philosophers who accept existing disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries and take up positions in the debates between canonical figures in their sub-disciplines. These philosophers believe that through narrow focus and rigorous argument, by exposing fallacies in arguments and freeing language from ambiguous forms of expression, philosophy will be able to accumulate a body of solid results. Such philosophers tend to see themselves as under-labourers to mathematics and science, justifying it and tidying up its arguments, or specialists in ethics, the philosophy of mind or one of the many sub-disciplines of philosophy. These are the ‘professional’ philosophers who are least concerned with radical questioning of received ideas. They are content with the proliferation of disciplines so long as they can continue their work without interference from other disciplines, and are happy to contribute the results of their work in multi-disciplinary forums.

I will then look at the history and philosophy of science. People working in this area are much more likely to have entered their field through questioning received views, and tend to have a different approach to philosophy and a different idea about what philosophy is and its relation is to science. Developments in this field have raised questions about the dynamics of cultures, the relationship between power and knowledge, how power operates both within science and between science and society. Philosophy is seen to have played a major role in the major revolutions in science, and in achieving the critical reflexivity required to achieve such revolutions. Consequently, historians and philosophers of science are prone to asking more fundamental questions about our culture as a whole and where society it is heading, to criticize existing disciplines and to promoting more radical cultural changes. By its very nature, the history and philosophy of science is interdisciplinary, continually examining other disciplines in order to develop as a discipline, while engaging with and criticizing these disciplines and the role they are playing in society.
The development of the history and philosophy of science in turn has helped revive another tradition in philosophy. In this tradition, philosophy is seen as playing a creative role in generating new, overarching conceptions of reality which can overcome the failures of past and present societies, including past and present science. Philosophers are represented as the physicians of culture, confronting its ills and participating in the creation of the future, insofar as civilized modes of thought affect the issue. This continues the tradition of philosophy that emerged in Ancient Greece and which had been challenged by the empiricist tradition in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but which was transmogrified and revived in post-Kantian German philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries only to be challenged again by the tradition of logicism. Opposing the atomistic, mechanistic thinking associated with Enlightenment, German philosophers attempted to develop a conception of the world in which humans, understood as conscious and self-conscious, free, creative and essentially social agents able to struggle to understand the world and themselves, could be seen to have evolved from nature. This is the notion of philosophy that Wilhelm von Humboldt assumed would be the core of the new form of university he created with the founding of the University of Berlin. This tradition is explicitly transdisciplinary, concerned to examine, critique and revise the assumptions of all other disciplines, provide the means to put all specialized disciplines in perspective and, through providing people with a coherent world-view, to orient people in life. I will consider this tradition of thought last.

It is members of the first group who have written most on population policy, taking up a variety of issues from a variety of perspectives within the sub-discipline of ethics. Most of these philosophers accept that there is a problem that needs to be addressed and have situated themselves within the sub-discipline of ethics, and deployed either some form of contractarian forms of rights theory or some form of utilitarianism to justify restrictions on the rights of individuals to reproduce. Donald Lee argues that while human fulfillment is the ultimate end, and to achieve this, freedom is a higher value than justice and justice is a higher value than security-survival, security-survival is the condition for justice and justice is the condition for freedom. What is temporally prior gives us a rank order on which to base duties and rights. Consistent with this, other philosophers have argued that the rights to procreate are not as sacrosanct as has been previously assumed, either by re-examining doctrines of rights or drawing on utilitarian arguments. However, E. Graham, has argued against a population policy on the grounds that demographers can’t predict population trends, nor can we be sure about resources, and even if population growth is impoverishing humanity, this would still not provide sufficient grounds for a population policy. Issues of immigration have been considered by philosophers, but as a rule they are concerned to justify the free flow of people and do not consider environmental issues.

Such arguments indicate the biases in mainstream philosophy. Mainstream philosophers tend to focus on the individual, with a strong commitment to defending the freedom of individuals. Any suggestion that such freedom should be constrained is taken as a radical step, understood entirely in terms of the extending the rights of the State over individuals. Beyond such biases, the problem with the mainstream approach to philosophy is that philosophers are never able to bring any issue to a conclusion. Not only have they not been able to decide between different ethical doctrines, they have provided no means to choose between different versions of each doctrine. Consequently, no ethical judgement on any issue is ever settled. Having
staked out areas such as ethics as the exclusive domain of philosophy, professional philosophers have provided arguments to support almost any position anyone might want to hold.

Historians and philosophers of science view such matters differently. Here the issue is more on how problems come to be construed, and the adequacy of construals of the situation. Post-positivist philosophy of science has focused on the social nature of the scientific endeavor, both in relation to how knowledge is pursued and purveyed as such, and more broadly, in terms of the relationship between institutions concerned with the pursuit of knowledge and other institutions, and society at large. Where the environment has been focused upon a central concern has been in the relationship between the mechanical philosophy that developed in the seventeenth century and the rise of the market economy and a new ruling class, a class which eventually came to dominate the world. The history and philosophy of science has problematised the forms of thinking which emerged in the seventeenth century in Europe, were elaborated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which now dominate the world, the status of different institutions and disciplines which make claim to knowledge and the power associated with such claims. There tends to be far greater awareness of the oppressive effects of such power relations, of how the subjugation of nature was associated with the denigration of rival claims to knowledge and the subjugation of people in Europe and throughout the world through the imposition of market relations, and how the celebration of individual freedom promulgated by those upholding an atomistic view of society has been associated with oppression of the poor. At the same time there is much greater awareness of alternative traditions within science and of the possibility of major revolutions within science which, by transforming the way people understand themselves and their place in the world, could fundamentally change social relations and relations between humans and nature.

From this perspective, the problem for environmentalists is to challenge the forms of thinking that are responsible for environmental destruction. To this end, ethics as a specialized discipline is almost irrelevant, and the dominant ethical doctrines, contractarian notions of rights and utilitarianism which emerged with the mechanistic view of nature and the capitalist economy, are suspect. So, what have such environmentalists to say about population policy? Carolyn Merchant is one such person who has considered the problem of population. In doing so she has been first and foremost concerned with the causes of population growth, which she does not take to be the Malthusian assumption that people naturally tend to have as many children as they can. She sees the biggest problem as addressing the destabilization and impoverishment of people which has been brought about by the destructive imperatives of global capitalism. Her focus is not on individuals or States but on communities and their capacity to transform themselves to free themselves from excessive dependence on the global market. What is required to achieve this, she argues, is a fundamental transformation of culture and society through the development of a new, ecological worldview. Since Merchant acknowledges the diversity of people is concerned that communities take responsibility for their destiny, she does not prescribed detailed guidelines on how they should behave.

It is difficult to find other thinkers in this tradition who have given any consideration to population policy, and Merchant’s work by itself is insufficiently developed. Part
of the problem here is that until recently there has not been much interest in the human sciences, and the discipline of the history and philosophy of science by definition excludes other areas of philosophy. However, recently, the discipline of history and philosophy of science has begun to embrace and support work on the human science, and as I noted, the ideas developed by historians and philosophers of science which Merchant is advancing are in fact a revival of a broader tradition of thought that goes back to late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Germany. These were the philosophers who attempted to develop a new, post-mechanist science of nature and developed a new conception of humanity on which they developed new ethical and political philosophies. Partly through the success of historians and philosophers of science in demolishing logical positivism, this tradition is now being revived and reconstituted, facilitating a new examination of the relationship between the natural and the human sciences and between the sciences and the humanities.

To conclude, I want to consider one aspect of this revival: work on the history of economics and human ecology, and the implications of this for how we think of the relationship between population and the environment. From the perspective of the tradition of post-mechanistic thought, economics is not one discipline among others. It began as the application of the forms of thinking developed in seventeenth century natural philosophy associated with the mechanistic view of the world to understanding society and is the main ideological support for defending and promoting the expansion of the market and the interests of those promoting this expansion. In the nineteenth century, classical economics was recognized and severely criticized as such by Marx, and over the last three decades, Philip Mirowski has revealed the extent to which neo-classical economics of the late nineteenth century and the revived neo-classical economics of recent years continues the quest to construe humans and human society in accordance with the mechanistic world-view in order to justify the market. While claiming to be a value free positive science, this science promulgates an ideal of human behaviour as rigorously egoistic and has effectively displaced political philosophy as the only discourse on how society should be organized that is now take seriously by politicians. It meshes neatly with theories in other disciplines presupposing a mechanistic view of the world and functions practically as a transdiscipline by measuring knowledge according to its contribution to profit making. From the perspective of mainstream economics, nature and people only register as significant if they can be profitably exploited or are a cost standing in the way of profit and income growth. Behaviour, including reproductive behaviour, is explained as primarily a response to market imperatives. Economists are sanguine that with the further extension of the market and further economic growth, the costs of bringing up children will curb population growth. The easiest way to hasten this trend is to remove the remaining constraints on the mobility of capital and the mobility of populations.

What Mirowski and others have been showing is that despite the appearance of logical coherence, neo-classical economics is fundamentally flawed, and that these flaws are in part manifestations of basic deficiencies in its metaphysical assumptions. At the same time they have been concerned to revive traditions which have rejected these assumptions and thereby facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of reality. Institutional economics and ecological economics belong to this alternative tradition. However, in order to relate the diversity of alternative schools of thought in
a number of disciplines which developed in opposition to mechanistic thinking, a discipline consistently formulated on more adequate metaphysical foundations is required, a discipline that can encompass economics as the study of the market and evaluate it from a broader perspective. Human ecology (originally called ‘cultural ecology’) is this discipline. Based on metaphysical assumptions deriving from post-mechanistic German metaphysics, it focuses on human communities within the context of a dynamic nature, communities seen to be distinctive from the communities of other forms of life by virtue of their cultural constitution and concomitantly, their capacity for cultural transformation. This discipline provides a framework for analysing the evolution of humanity to the present, the rise and fall of civilizations and the emergence of the market and the triumph and expansion of European civilization to dominate the globe. Human ecologists see the issue of population and the environment as far more complex and are far less sanguine about the future than economists. In *The Eighth Day*, Richard Newbold Adams described a world which functions as a system in which high energy societies characterized by very low birth rates are coupled to low energy societies characterized by very high birth rates, and all societies are under internal and external influences to expand their uses of energy. Joseph Tainter has identified such conditions as those which in the past have led to the collapse of complex societies. The ideological domination of society by mainstream economics is preventing this situation being recognized. This is the state of affairs that metaphysical thought can orient people to confront and overcome.