



KS Population Ethics

University of Graz | Department of Philosophy | Summer Term 2020

Time:	Thursdays, 13:30 – 15:00	
Venue:	SR 34.K1, Attemsgasse 25/K, 8010 Graz	
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Office hours:	By appointment	

Description

Present decisions can affect the number of future people living, their well-being, and identity. This holds both for individual decisions (e.g., a woman decides that she wants to have a child) and for social policies (e.g., a state decides that it will give priority to reducing greenhouse gas emissions). Population ethics addresses the moral aspects of such decisions. Among other questions, it asks: Might it be wrong to procreate? Is it possible for an action to harm a person even though this person's existence or identity is contingent on the action? Would it be better to have many people with low average well-being or few people with high average well-being? Should we care about the survival of humankind? How does this continued survival relate to the meaning of our individual lives? What could be permissible ways of addressing overpopulation? In the course we will discuss such questions by engaging with important texts about them. As a case study, we will also consider the implications of population ethics for policies about climate change.

Aims

Having completed the course, students should be able to:

- name and explain some of the main questions in population ethics;
- explain and evaluate arguments for and against main answers to these questions;
- relate questions in population ethics to other areas of moral and political philosophy;
- identify and critically reflect on the implications of population ethics for social policy.

Schedule and Topics

- 03/19/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: Preliminary Discussion
- 03/26/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: David Benatar: Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence
- 04/02/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: Derek Parfit: Reasons and Persons, Section 16 [on the Non-Identity Problem]
- 04/23/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: Derek Parfit: Reasons and Persons, Section 17 [on the Repugnant Conclusion]
- 04/30/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: John Broome: Should We Value Population?
- 05/07/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane: The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best Chance of the Best Life
- 05/14/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: Discussion of Seminar Paper Proposals
- 05/28/2020, 12:00 – 15:00: Presentations
- 06/04/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: Clare Heyward: A Growing Problem? Dealing with Population Increases in Climate Justice
- 06/18/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: Samuel Scheffler: Death and the Afterlife, Part 1
- 06/25/2020, 13:30 – 15:00: Final Discussion

All texts can be downloaded at the course's Moodle page (moodle.uni-graz.at).

Assessment

Seminar Paper

Your seminar paper should address a specific and interesting research question in the area of population ethics. For example, you may compare the arguments of two or more authors, criticize the arguments of a particular author, or defend a thesis of your own. You can choose your research question freely. Make sure that your paper involves sound arguments that support your answer to this question.

The language of your seminar paper should be clear, succinct and intelligible. Its structure should be logical and aid understanding. In particular, you should motivate and explicitly state your research question in an introductory section, and summarize your thesis and most important arguments in a concluding section. A first proposal of your seminar paper is to be submitted via Moodle by May 13, 2020.

Your seminar paper should be between 1.500 and 3.000 words (excluding title page, contents, footnotes, bibliography, etc.), and refer to at least three relevant sources. These sources can be texts that we discussed in class, additional texts provided on the course's Moodle page or texts which you researched yourself.

Your seminar paper must be submitted via Moodle by September 30, 2020. The grade will be primarily based on the following criteria: (1) the adequacy and interestingness of your research question, (2) the soundness and relevance of your arguments, (3) your compliance with the rules of academic writing (citation, style, etc.), (4) the clarity, succinctness and intelligibility of your language, and (5) the adequacy of your paper's structure.

Further recommendations for writing a philosophy seminar paper can be found at: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>.

Presentation

The double session on May 28 will be dedicated to student presentations. You are asked to present one of the papers which are part of the additional literature package on Moodle. Your presentation should explain the paper's context, research question/s, thesis/theses and main arguments. It should also involve a critical evaluation. The papers for the presentation session will not be pre-read by other students. Hence, special care should be taken to present them in clear and simple terms. To facilitate understanding, you are also asked to either provide a PowerPoint presentation or a one-page handout.

Comments/Questions

In our course we will discuss seven texts. For at least six of these texts you should formulate a comment or question that we may then consider in class. Your contributions should either address how to understand certain aspects of the text or critically reflect on it. For example, you may ask how an author uses a certain key concept, or whether a particular argument is based on a problematic tacit assumption. Your comments/questions should contain less than five sentences. For each session they should be submitted via Moodle by Wednesday, 23:55.

Class Participation

Please do the reading and participate actively in our discussions; for example, ask questions, raise objections or point out interconnections.

General Policies

Attendance

In order to complete the course in a regular way you must not be absent from more than two of our twelve sessions (one session = 1.5 hrs). In case you miss three or four sessions I ask for an explanation (e.g., doctor's confirmation) and some compensatory task (e.g., a longer seminar paper). In case you miss five or more sessions you cannot successfully complete the course.

Deadlines

Late submissions of seminar papers and comments/questions will not be considered.

Academic Honesty

Violations of academic honesty (e.g., using others' ideas without citing them) will automatically lead to a negative assessment of the seminar paper or comment/question in which they occur.

Discussion Rules

For our course to succeed it is essential that we treat each other politely and with respect (even when our opinions on some matter diverge).

Laptops, Smartphones, etc.

Please limit the use of electronic devices as much as possible (except for note-taking).