



The dilemma of humanism

One of the most pressing problems of our time is the demographic evolution of humankind on Earth. On the one hand the absolute numbers continue to increase exponentially, which leads to crowding and resource depletion, and many associated problems such as pollution, including rising concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere.¹ On the other hand, life expectancy is steadily increasing, which has so far led to aging with infirmity, which is laying an unsustainable burden on healthcare systems (such as Britain's National Health Service).

It is a very human problem, in the sense that it primarily concerns human beings. It is only natural for *Homo sapiens*, like any species, to wish to promote itself by increasing its numbers. The existence of this wish is evinced by the tremendous efforts to prevent infant mortality through better medicine and to prevent starvation by growing more food. The latter was achieved by introducing new technologies into agriculture, including higher-yielding varieties (created by breeding), chemical fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation and farm mechanization (and, latterly, introducing information technologies that enable, for example, a farmer to microcultivate each small area of his or her farm).²

In the past, national leaders have promoted population growth for political ends. For example, French law even today contains many measures designed to encourage large families, encouragement which goes back to the time when people were needed to maintain a large army.³ Similarly, the Chinese leader Mao Zedong for many years advocated having a large population as a kind of insurance against the risk of major cities being destroyed by US atomic bombs.⁴ These policies simply reflect the view of the great encyclopaedist Diderot who

wrote "la plus grande richesse d'un Etat consiste dans le nombre de ses sujets", and clearly assigned to the government the rôle of encouraging families with large numbers of children [5].

A third and very contemporary strand of this problem is refugees. The British Red Cross asserts on placards now displayed inside railway carriages "1 million Syrian children are now refugees. The situation is getting worse". One should bear in mind that the origin of Syria's troubles was a veritable population explosion in rural areas followed by several consecutive years of very unfavourable conditions for agriculture.

At the same time as increasing numbers it is clearly very human to strive for "the fullest possible development of every human being".⁵ The Declaration contains many statements ("the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom"; "a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment") that become increasingly difficult to fulfil, it would appear, as the Earth becomes more and more crowded.

Apart from the military-political motivation to increase the population,⁶ it is generally and fundamentally true that the bigger the population, the more genetic and, possibly, cultural diversity there will be. Genetic diversity is obviously useful for making the species more robust and resilient with respect to environmental and other vagaries. Cultural diversity will enhance the ability of the species as a whole to collectively solve problems. A concrete example is given by Sir Lawrence Bragg, who estimated that one good physicist was bred per year per million inhabitants [7]. Unless there is some optimum population, beyond which cultural diversity begins to decline,⁷ the more physicists there are the better humanity will be able to solve its problems, one may presume.

¹ Many authors have contributed towards pointing this out, including J.H. Brown, Costanza, the Ehrlichs, Lovelock, Schramski and others. For a recent review, see ref. 1.

² The most recent technology to be introduced is genetic engineering or modification of crops, with the aim of increasing yields by enhancing the robustness of the plant with respect to difficult environmental conditions, including pests, as well as by other artifices. Mason has argued that these practices (including genetic modification to make crop plants resistant to powerful herbicides such as glyphosate, which can then be applied everywhere to destroy everything but the crops) place an intolerable and unsustainable burden on the earth's ecosystem [2].

³ See ref. 3 for a discussion of this point.

⁴ This changed after Mao's death, when the burgeoning population began to put intolerable strains on the economy. See ref. 4 for a discussion.

⁵ *The Amsterdam Declaration 2002* of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).

⁶ A further military-political motivation for having a large population is to be able to supply crews for lengthy space voyages, perhaps lasting several generations, undertaken to colonize new planets (see ref. 6 for more discussion about this aspect). The motivation for colonization is not, of course, to relieve terrestrial overcrowding (which would be exacerbated by building up the population to provide the space crews) but simply to expand the presence of humans in the universe—an obvious next step after having expanded to cover the Earth.

⁷ One factor promoting cultural decline is the phenomenon I call "channeling". Until some time in the mid-1990s there were two rail routes from Basel to Belfort, the direct one via Mulhouse and the more picturesque and somewhat longer one via Delémont and Delle. The latter, which I preferred, was very underused—the train (from Delémont onwards) invariably had only two carriages

In summary, then, there are strong arguments for drastic population reduction, and for continuing population growth. Both arguments would appear to have validity from a scientific viewpoint and, hence, could at least in principle be subjected to cost–benefit analysis.⁸ Since that does not, however, seem to be feasible, at least at present, let us turn to the ethical sphere to see whether it can provide any illumination.

The world's great religions have remarkably little to say about this crucial issue. Judaism has "be fruitful and multiply" [8], which has become incorporated into Christianity. Islam appears to be neutral on the topic. If it is correct to assert that any religion would like to see the number of its adherents grow (in order to ensure more revenue and more influence), given that it is far easier to grow from the offspring of existing adherents than to make conversions, "be fruitful and multiply" might be a generally accepted maxim. Even without competitors, would not the opposite policy lead to ultimate extinction? Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that Buddhism accords great social prestige to the celibate monk, who represents an ideal for all members of society, implying that Buddhists reject the "be fruitful and multiply" attitude [9].⁹

We have already noted that the demographic problem is above all a human problem, hence humanism should have something constructive to say about it. We include humanism among the world's great religions, even though the official organs of humanism appear to wish to distance it from religion. Nevertheless, according to Eric Fromm's very reasonable definition of a religion as anything that offers (1) a person or group of persons ultimate orientation, and (2) an object to which complete devotion can be accorded [11], there seems to be no reason not to consider humanism as a religion, and the

Amsterdam Declaration⁵ can be taken to be its official creed.¹⁰ The British Humanist Association (BHA) has compiled a succinct, three-point summary: a humanist is someone who: trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works; makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals; believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own life meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same. No differently from those of the Amsterdam Declaration, these tenets can be used to argue in favour of both population growth and population reduction. The question really boils down to a choice between the quantity and quality of humanity. Eugenics is rooted in humanist thought and was introduced as a way to improve the quality of humanity, but at the same time it was desired to increase the quantity of eugenically sound humans, hence as an auxiliary notion it does not really help us either in trying to decide the question of population. Taking the product of quantity and quality is a neat way of combining them, leading to utilitarianism ("the greatest happiness of the greatest number"), although it appears to then duck the question of population growth versus reduction, the respective merits of which cannot be decided without a meticulous reckoning of the contribution of every single human being. At least that would be in accord with the humanist emphasis on respecting the scientific method.

So far we have neglected the beliefs of the world's largest group of humans—the Chinese. Traditionally, Confucianism played a large rôle. It has been pointed out that "all Chinese are Confucianists when successful, and Taoists when they are failures" [13]. Since the middle of the 20th century, communism has loomed large, which

and a diminishing number of, and towards the end practically no, passengers, whereas the direct route became more and more crowded. I believe that a similar phenomenon has been observed with the Internet—although more and more new websites are being created, the proportion that is frequently visited is becoming smaller and smaller. Similarly with motor traffic, which is constantly increasing overall, yet becoming more and more concentrated on the motorways (of which new routes are constantly being constructed), while the by-ways are becoming less frequented.

⁸ Although at first sight any such analysis would appear to be too speculative (because of the need to make too many unverifiable assertions) to be useful, some attempts have nevertheless been made, such as the *Benefits and Costs of the Population and Demographic Targets for the Post-2015 Development Agenda* reports (introductory by M. Herrmann, substantive by H.-P. Kohler & J.R. Behrman) Copenhagen: Consensus Centre (2014). The scope of these reports is, however, far narrower than what would be needed to truly illuminate the two opposing arguments.

⁹ For a comparison of Hinduism with the others, see ref. 10.

¹⁰ The "fundamentals of modern humanism" promulgated by the IHEU are a strange hodgepodge of statements that have evolved rather far from the ideas of the 14th century Petrarch (sometimes considered to be the "father of humanism") and the later Erasmus. One notices the strong affirmation of the supremacy of science and scientific methods (tenet 2⁵), but at the same time democracy is supported (tenet 3⁵). The two are really incompatible—as Galileo is said to have remarked, "in the sciences, the authority of thousands of opinions is not worth as much as one tiny spark of reason in an individual man". It is the notion of democracy that has obtruded upon the creed, and for no obvious reason—as Parkinson has pointed out, majority rule effectively enslaves significant sectors of society to the benefit of other sectors [12], which is hardly compatible with the rest of the creed. It is also disquieting that Petrarch's advocacy of plain living is not included among the 7 tenets.⁵

despite its often inhuman policies nevertheless seems to be ideologically rooted in humanism, and as far as numbers are concerned would seem to fall back on Diderot's maxim [5]. Finally, in contemporary China it seems to be Mammon that fulfils Fromm's definition of a religion; doubtless it was always present but nowadays has no effective counterbalancing forces.

Mammon, it would appear, thrives on a large population. In the eyes of Mammon, the most relevant attribute of a human being is that he or she is a consumer. As Don Cupitt has pointed out,¹¹ Mammon wants people to be healthy and well educated and desires universal prosperity. The increasing necessity of mass production to supply ever-growing numbers does not necessarily imply a reduction in quality of the goods supplied. Large consumer-oriented manufacturers are now talking about "masstige"—the mass production of products perceived to be prestigious. If manufacturing technology continues to advance, the ultimate stage in its evolution will be the personal nanofactory, with goods becoming so abundant that Mammon will become largely irrelevant [14].

Unfortunately, empirical observation associates Mammon with declining cultural quality. It has long been observed that the intellectual content and aesthetic quality of movies seems to move inversely with advances in the actual technology of their production, and the same can be noticed in other areas of human activity. Mammon inevitably favours mass appeal, which empirical observation shows does not usually correspond with what is elevating for humanity. It is beyond the scope of this essay to go into deeper reasons for this inverse association. Until such an analysis has been carried out, it would be prudent to defer according supremacy to Mammon among the religions. At any rate, elevation of humanity need not be synonymous with asceticism, but nor should it imply material abundance. Surveying Chinese thought on the matter, Tuan especially commends Mo-tzu, according to whom houses were erected from necessity and to sustain a moral life, not for show; civilization was civility—good manners and the arts rather than the construction of a dominative material world [15].

Here, we can only adumbrate an approach to solving the problem with which we started—whether to let the human population N increase or decrease. First we must decide what is our dominant value. Let it be civility, C .

Then we merely need to enquire whether dC/dN (or, at least to start with, $\partial C/\partial N$) is positive or negative, and choose accordingly. This would certainly be in accord with the purported rationality of humanism,⁵ and hopefully C could be defined and parametrized in a way attracting general agreement, so there would be little argument about the form of the differential coefficient.¹²

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¹¹ See ref. 11, p. 82.

¹² Curiously, humanism seems to ignore law, which may be considered to be a universal framework for governing our lives. Durkheim considered law to be an expression of human solidarity [16] (see ref. 17 for a modern view).