



Population and Overpopulation: Malthus versus Marx

Jan Greguš

Center of Outpatient Gynecology and Primary Care
Center of Prenatal Diagnostics
Department of Philosophy, Masaryk University Brno

Czech Republic



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Introduction

Human Overpopulation

many definitions

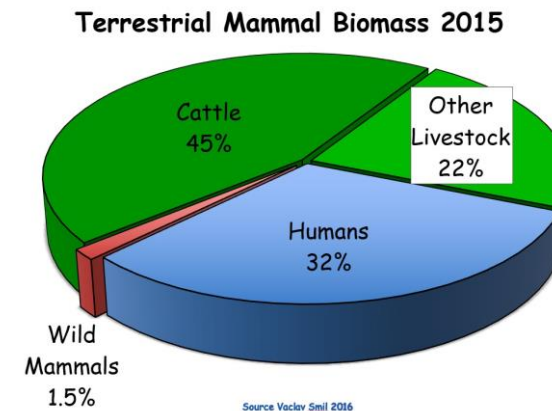
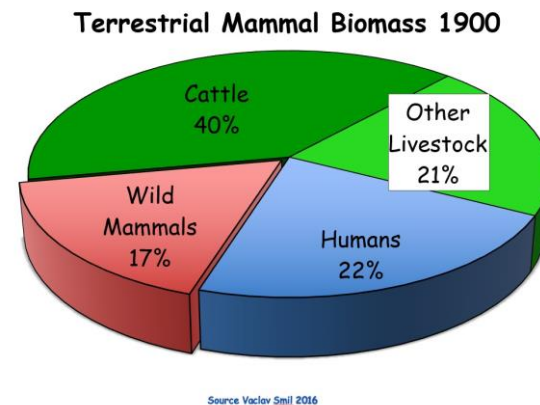
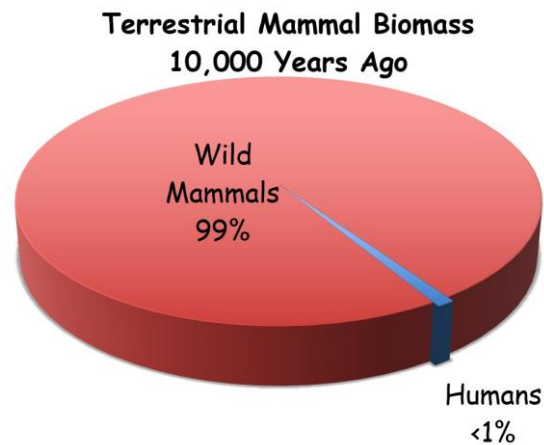
- (1) the condition of being populated with excessively large numbers of people (Oxford Dictionaries 2021)
- (2) a situation which occurs when the number of human occupants of an area exceeds the ability of that area to provide for those occupants (Definitions 2021)
- (3) When is an area overpopulated? When its population cannot be maintained without rapidly depleting non-renewable resources, and without degrading the capacity of the environment to support the population. In short, if the long-term carrying capacity of an area is clearly degraded by its current human occupants, that area is overpopulated. (Ehrlich 1990)

environmentally defined



Problems It Causes to Nature

- climate change
- environmental degradation and **pollution**, resource depletion, increase in municipal waste
- **biodiversity loss**, deforestation, desertification
- mass species extinction (**species genocide**)





Problems It Causes to Humans

- water scarcity, food insecurity, starvation, malnutrition
- pandemic emergence, inadequate healthcare services
- increased poverty, slowing economic growth, inadequate housing
- forced migration, climate refugees
- radicalization, extremism, widespread conflict, **resource-driven wars**
- major obstacle to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals like (1) No poverty, (2) Zero hunger, (3) Good health and wellbeing





Population and Overpopulation

and issues generally related to human numbers tend to be seen as **a politically incorrect topic**.

Thus, they are largely **dismissed or ignored** in the public and political domains

despite being identified as important by many great thinkers in recent as well as past history.

Among them, Malthus and Marx gathered the largest following.



Malthus and Marx

Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834)

English cleric, philosopher and economist in the fields of political economy and demography
population discussed in his famous work *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (many times revised)

Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883)

German philosopher, critic of political economy and socialist revolutionary
population discussed in his most notable work *Capital*, also in *Grundrisse* and *Anti-Duhring* (Engels)



Malthus versus Marx

Malthusian views

on population were **demographic**: it is necessary to reduce population to improve the economy.

problem: overpopulation/too many people → underdevelopment, poverty, lack of resources

solution: reduction in population → economic well-being of a society

Marxist views

were rather **economic**: it is necessary to improve the economy to reduce population.

problem: underdevelopment, poverty → overpopulation/too many people

solution: economic revolution, increase in standards of living → reduction in population



Malthus versus Marx

Malthusian views prevail (stage one):

rapidly expanding populations in many parts of developing world

scholars (Coale and Hoover 1958, Myrdal 1968, Enke 1970, etc.) widely accepted

Only by bringing rapid population growth under control could countries hope to achieve improved economic performance and higher standards of living.

= **neo-Malthusian views** – focus on population growth reduction as precondition for economic growth



Malthus versus Marx

Marxist views prevail (stage two):

Scholars (Singha 1974, Birdsall 1988, etc.) dominated

Rapid population growth can slow development, but only under specific circumstances and generally with limited or weak effects. ... Population growth is neither good or bad. It is a neutral phenomenon.

= **neo-Marxist views** – economic development is a primary target. Improvement in economic conditions leads to stabilization or decrease in population growth



Malthus versus Marx

These two opposite approaches can be found in the themes of international population conferences:

1974 World Population Conference (Bucharest, Romania)

conference's slogan: Family planning is the solution.

1984 International Conference on Population (Mexico City, Mexico)

conference's slogan: Development is the best contraceptive pill.



Malthus and Marx

Nevertheless, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, Egypt) managed to bridge both approaches and solve the “demography versus economy” clash:

- (1) It acknowledged both the importance of family planning and development.
 - (2) While also, it recognized the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights
 - (3) as well as girl’s and women’s rights, education and empowerment
- to be the pathway to sustainable development.

Though, being such a ground-breaking event, it was not efficient as it could have been. Why not?



Why not?

Because it does not target
all roots of population growth.



Roots of Population Growth

There are five components of population growth:

- (1) mortality decline
- (2) population momentum (a bulk of young people entering into the reproductive pool)
- (3) wanted fertility
- (4) unwanted fertility
- (5) coerced fertility

To bring about sustainability in general, and sustainable development in particular, we must address all four roots of our population growth, including roots (2), and (3).



Excursion into Sustainability

Sustainability as an ideal (concept):

vastness of literature on sustainability

the goal of sustainability = „create and maintain conditions, under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permits fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations“ (NEPA 1969)

A sustainable approach is built on **three pillars of sustainability (environmental, economic, social)**.

A sustainable approach protects the environment, strengthens communities, and fosters prosperity.



Excursion into Sustainability

Unsustainability as a fact:

The goal of sustainability is to **maintain equilibrium between humanity and nature**. Humanity, is not getting any nearer to this goal. On the contrary, it is **going the opposite way** despite many warnings:

- *The Population Bomb* (1968)
- *The Limits to Growth* (1972)
- *Doctors and Overpopulation* (1972)
- *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity* (1992)
- *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice* (2017)
- *Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency* (2019)
- *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (2020)
- *IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report on Climate Change* (2022), and more

The main causes of unsustainability = human numbers, activities, production and consumption



Sustainable Population

Estimations for a long-term sustainable population are based on various criteria and assumptions:

- 1.5 – 2 billion (Daily et al. 1994)
- 3 billion (Pimental et al. 1994)
- 2 billion (Daily et al. 2010)
- 3.1 billion (Lianos and Pseiridis 2016)
- 3 billion (Tucker 2019)
- 0.5 – 5 billion (Dasgupta 2019)

Obviously, more studies, discussion and general consensus on the ideal number are needed.

Nevertheless, one thing is crystal clear – **human population is far beyond being sustainable.**



Unsustainable Population

In 2022, the human population is 7.9 billion and rising, with growth of over 80 million a year

No reversing in the foreseeable future (despite slowing population growth and fertility decreases)

Current medium-variant projections are 8.5 billion (2030), 9.7 billion (2050), and 10.9 billion (2100)

Our World in Data The size of the world population over the last 12,000 years

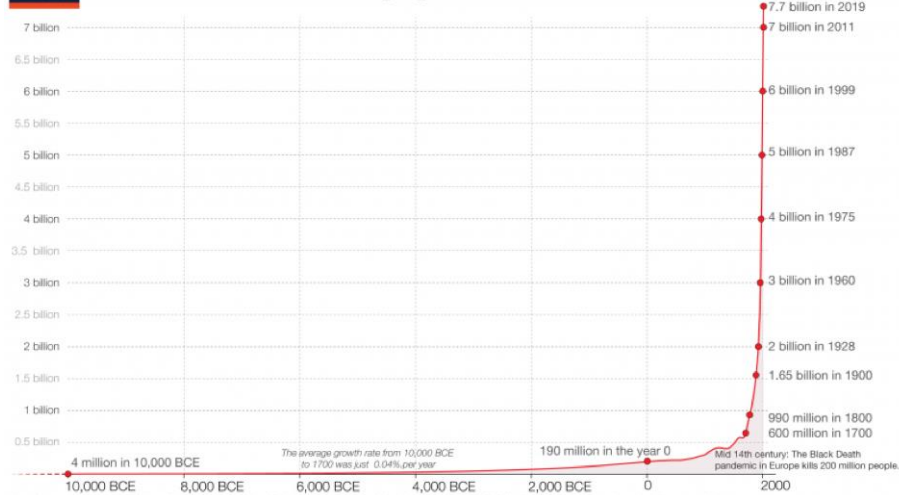
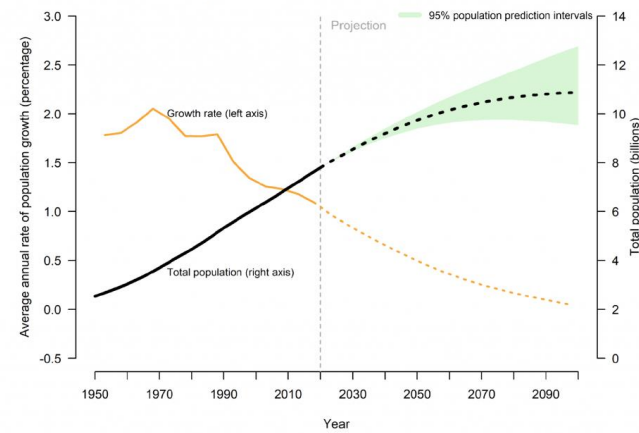


Figure 1. Population size and annual growth rate for the world: estimates, 1950-2020, and medium-variant projection with 95 per cent prediction intervals, 2020-2100

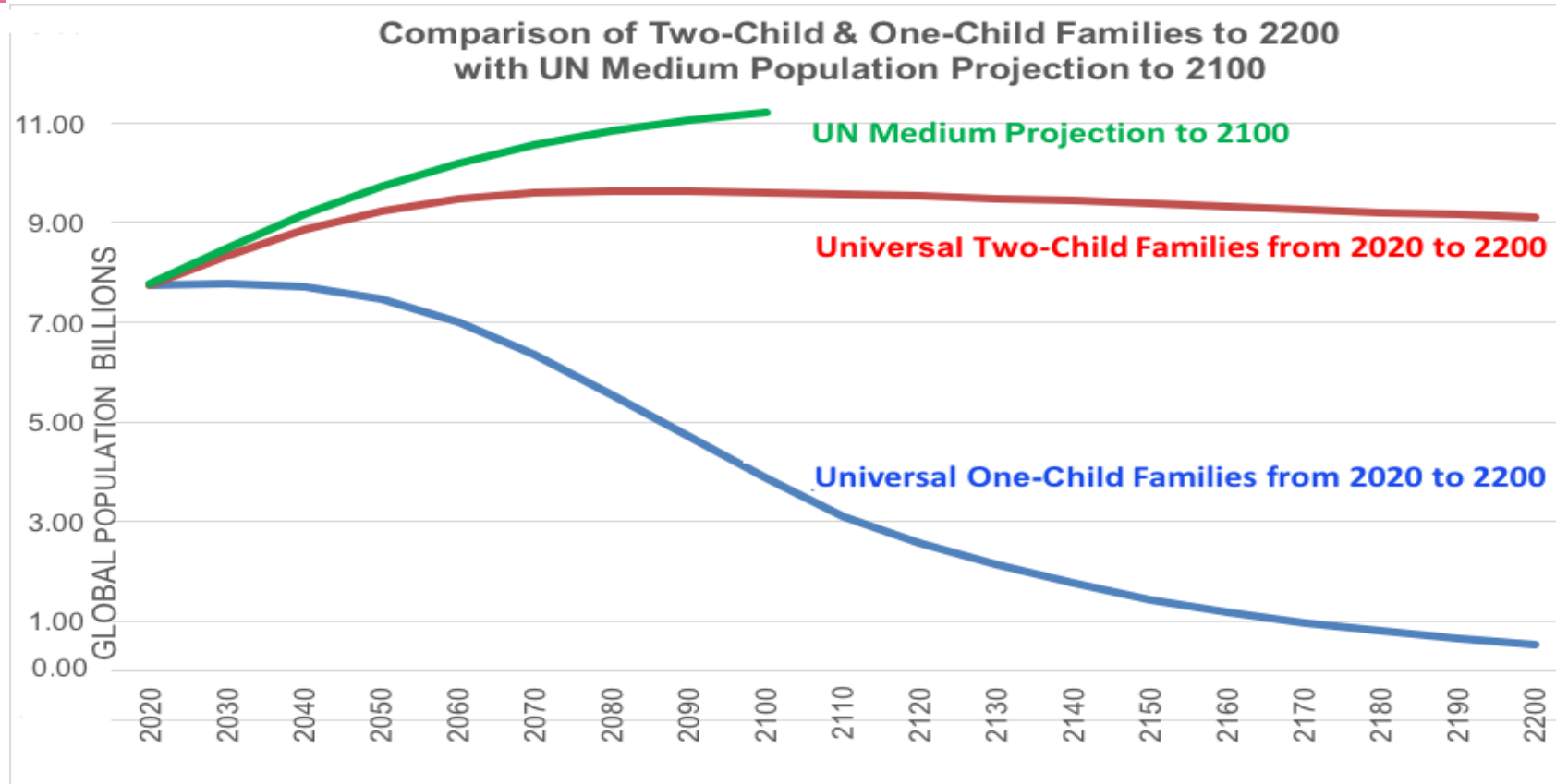
Population growth continues at the global level, but the rate of increase is slowing, and the world's population could cease to grow around the end of the century



Data source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Prospects 2019*.



The Pathway to Sustainability



This study explores the hypothetical results of a voluntary, global agreement from 2020 that all families should have either two children or only one child, and compares them with current population projections, concluding that only universal one-child families could solve the problem. It further discusses the remarkable fact that a UN-projected fertility decrease, down from 2.4 in 2020 to below 2.0 by 2100, results in a steadily increasing population: 11.2 billion by 2100. This is because decreasing fertility is counterbalanced by a higher population base over time. Though a hypothetical decrease to two-child families would stop the global population from rising above 10 billion, it would take until 2480 to return to 2020-level population. (Ferguson and Rimmer 2017)



Targetting Roots (4) and (5)

Voluntary family planning

contraceptive prevalence as the greatest factor for a country's fertility rate

essential, wanted, needed and doable; the greatest medical achievements alongside vaccination

However, greater investments worldwide are necessary, currently under 1% of development aid.

Education and empowerment

girls' education and (women's empowerment) among the most powerful forces on the planet

educated girls are healthier as well as wealthier; it benefits whole communities and economies



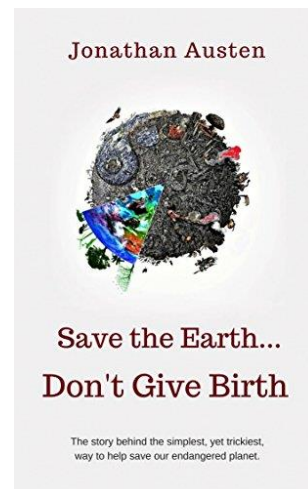
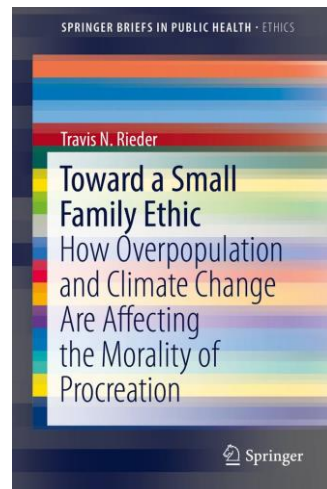
Targetting Roots (2) and (3)

Reproductive ethics of small families

in philosophy, increasing focus on reproductive and environmental philosophy and ethics

given plethora of problems mentioned before, philosophers and environmentalists discuss and promote **reproductive ethics of small families as a new global ethical norm**

small family = a 2-child maximum per family (replacement level), and ideally less (one-child ethics)





Targetting Roots (2) and (3)

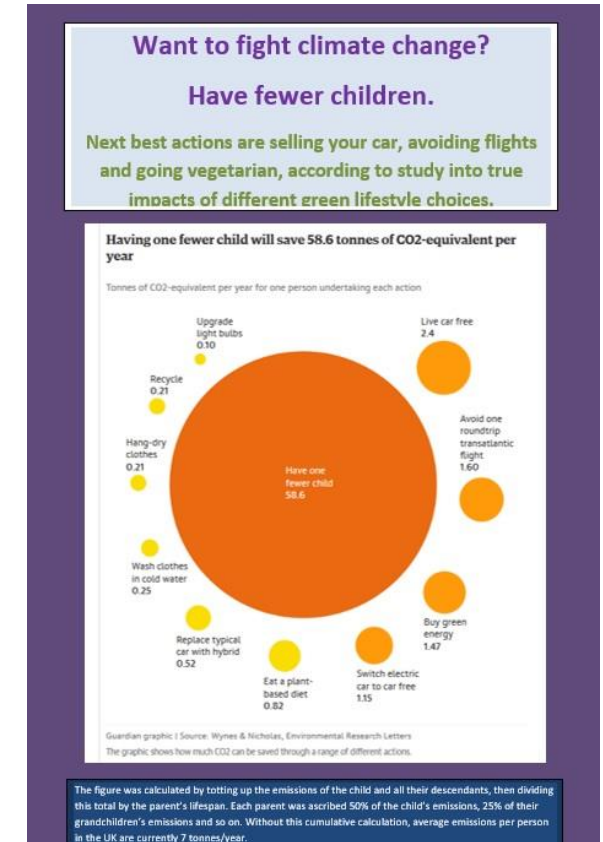
Environmental Ethics

another important sub-discipline in philosophy (alongside reproductive ethics)

It helps to point out **we are not a single species on the planet** and that **other species have their rights too** (species' rights to continued existence).

Also, that **our future generations have the right to live in a world in which they can thrive and prosper** – that is not be possible in an overpopulated world depleted of nature resources, afflicted by climate change, etc.

It helps to illustrate consequences of human prolific reproduction (and activities) and **what can be done about it – reduce our numbers in the first place**





Targetting Roots (2) and (3)

must be done voluntarily (no coercion, no control, no one-child policy)

But it is exactly what reproductive and environmental ethics are – ethics.

need to promoted – always – with humanity, wisdom and compassion, with understanding of ethnical, regional, cultural, religious specifications

As such, promotion of sexual and reproductive rights could/should be accompanied by promotion of reproductive and environmental ethics

(humans have rights, but fulfilling those rights bear consequences – and humans should know them)

Both are ethical (the former is helping to individuals, the latter to future individuals, to other species and the planet Earth).



Take Home Message

Due to the severity of the problems caused by human overpopulation, we need to further:

promote sexual and reproductive health and rights and voluntary family planning

promote gender equity and girls' and women's rights, education, and empowerment

but also

put population and overpopulation back on the table of politicians and into the public eye

embrace ethics beyond the individual human lifespan and ethics encouraging smaller families size as the recommended ideal global norm



Throughout History 1

What great thinkers said in recent as well as past history on population and overpopulation:

One would have thought that it was even more necessary to limit population than property. The neglect of this subject, which in existing states is so common, is a never failing cause of poverty among the citizens; and poverty is the parent of revolution and crime. – **Aristotle (384 – 322 BC)**

If the Earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger but not a better or a happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it. – **John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873)**



Throughout History 2

What great thinkers said in recent as well as past history on population and overpopulation:

The Earth is full of the superfluous, life is spoiled by the all too many. – Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900)

Once the sacrilege against God was the greatest sacrilege, but God died, and then all these desecrators died. Now to desecrate the Earth is the most terrible thing, and to esteem the bowels of the unfathomable higher than the meaning of the Earth! – Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900)

You are young and wish for a child and marriage for yourself. But I ask you: are you a person who has a right to wish for a child? ... Or do the animal and neediness speak out of your wish? Or loneliness? Or discord with yourself? – Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900)



Throughout History 3

What great thinkers said in recent as well as past history on population and overpopulation:

Overpopulation in various countries has become a serious threat to the health of people and a grave obstacle to any attempt to organize peace on this planet. – **Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955)**

Once it was necessary that the people should multiply and be fruitful if the race was to survive. But now to preserve the race it is necessary that people hold back the power of propagation. – **Hellen Keller (1880 – 1968)**

Some of these (Asian) countries, like India, far from needing a bigger population, would be better off with fewer people. – **Jawaharlal Nehru, Indian Prime Minister (1889 – 1964)**



Throughout History 4

What great thinkers said in recent as well as past history on population and overpopulation:

The Green revolution has won a temporary success in man's war against hunger and deprivation; it has given man a breathing space. If fully implemented, the revolution can provide sufficient food for sustenance during the next three decades. But the frightening power of human reproduction must also be curbed; otherwise the success of the Green revolution will be ephemeral only ... Most people still fail to comprehend the magnitude and menace of the 'Population Monster'. – **Norman Borlaug**, the "father" of Green revolution (1914 – 2009)

Those who fail to see that population growth and climate change are two sides of the same coin are either ignorant or hiding from the truth. These two huge environmental problems are inseparable and to discuss one while ignoring the other is irrational. – **Sir James Lovelock** (1919 –)



Throughout History 5

What great thinkers said in recent as well as past history on population and overpopulation:

Democracy cannot survive overpopulation. Human dignity cannot survive it. Convenience and decency cannot survive it. As you put more and more people into the world, the value of life not only declines, it disappears. It doesn't matter if someone dies. The more people there are, the less one individual matters. – **Isaac Asimov (1920 – 1992)**

Which is the greater danger – nuclear warfare or the population explosion? The latter absolutely! To bring about nuclear war, someone has to do something; someone has to press a button. To bring about destruction by overcrowding, mass starvation, anarchy, the destruction of our most cherished values, there is not need to do anything. We need only do nothing except what comes naturally – and breed. And how easy it is to do nothing. – **Isaac Asimov (1920 – 1992)**



Throughout History 6

What great thinkers said in recent as well as past history on population and overpopulation:

It is intellectually dishonest to talk about saving the environment without stressing the obvious fact that stopping population growth is a necessary condition for sustainability. – **Albert Allen Bartlett (1923 – 2013)**

If we don't halt population growth with justice and compassion, it will be done for us by nature, brutally and without pity – and will leave a ravaged world. – **Henry Way Kendall (1926 – 1999)**

The raging monster upon the land is population growth. In its presence, sustainability is but a fragile theoretical concept. – **Edward Osborne Wilson (1929 – 2021)**



Throughout History 7

What great thinkers said in recent as well as past history on population and overpopulation:

As I see it, humanity needs to reduce its impact on the Earth urgently and there are three ways to achieve this: we can stop consuming so many resources, we can change our technology and we can reduce the growth of our population. – **Sir David Attenborough (1926 –)**

One thing you can say is that in places where women are in charge of their bodies, where they have the vote, where they are allowed to dictate what they do and what they want, whether it's proper medical facilities for birth control, the birth rate falls. – **Sir David Attenborough (1926 –)**

Unlike plagues of the dark ages or contemporary diseases we do not yet understand, the modern plague of overpopulation is soluble by means we have discovered and with resources we possess. What is lacking is not sufficient knowledge of the solution but universal consciousness of the gravity of the problem and education of the billions who are its victims. – **Martin Luther King (1929 – 1968)**



Throughout History 8

What great thinkers said in recent as well as past history on population and overpopulation:

Solving the population problem is not going to solve the problems of racism ... of sexism ... of religious intolerance ... or war ... or gross economic inequality. But if you don't solve the population problem, you're not going to solve any of those problems. Whatever problem you're interested in, you're not going to solve it unless you also solve the population problem. – **Paul Ehrlich (1932 –)**

Basically, then, there are only two kinds of solutions to the population problem. One is a 'birth rate solution,' in which we find ways to lower the birth rate. The other is a 'death rate solution,' in which ways to raise the death rate – war, famine, pestilence – find us. – **Paul Ehrlich (1932 –)**



Throughout History 9

What great thinkers said in recent as well as past history on population and overpopulation:

One of the great challenges today is the population explosion. Unless we are able to tackle this issue effectively we will be confronted with the problem of the natural resources being inadequate for all the human beings on this Earth. – **Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama (1935 –)**

The growth in population is very much bound up with poverty, and in turn poverty plunders the Earth. When human groups are dying of hunger, they eat everything: grass, insects, everything. They cut down the trees, they leave the land dry and bare. All other concerns vanish. That's why in the next thirty years problems we call 'environmental' will be the hardest that humanity has to face. – **Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama (1935 –)**



Throughout History 10

Now last words – actually almost the first:

Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.
– Karl Marx, The Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach

Philosophy is not dead, still has its use, now, perhaps more than before:

Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to SAVE it.
– Jan Greguš, Towards a Sustainable Humanity