

Johann Frick

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will present a talk titled



“The Value of Life, the Value of Virtue”

Abstract:

It is sometimes said that, just as Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires, the field of population ethics is the graveyard of moral theories. Ethical views that appeared promising when theorizing about fixed-population contexts often struggle to provide satisfactory answers to questions involving the creation of new people.

In this talk, I attempt to turn this trope on its head. I explore what insights might be gleaned for our general moral theorizing by viewing some of its traditional questions through the lens of population ethics. I want to ask: “What can population ethics ‘give back’ to moral philosophy?”

I will begin by offering a solution to one of the central problems of population ethics – the so-called Procreation Asymmetry: How can we explain the widespread intuition that while we have strong moral reason not to create a future person whose life would foreseeably be miserable, there is no corresponding moral reason, let alone an obligation, to create a future person just because her life would be happy? In Jan Narveson’s phrase, why is it that we are ‘in favor of making people happy, but neutral about making happy people’?

Then, in the second and third parts of my talk, I will seek to persuade you that there are striking parallels between the puzzle of the Procreation Asymmetry and a number of other, seemingly disparate ethical questions – questions about the value of manifesting certain virtues and of fulfilling our desires. I will argue that, once these parallels are noted, this opens up elegant new solutions to these venerable philosophical problems, while at the same time bringing several new questions into sharper focus.

Friday April 24th 3:30pm

Helen C. White 4207

