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HUMAN EXTINCTION AND THE VALUE OF OUR EFFORTS

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Discussions about nuclear weapons, the depletion of the ozone layer, and the possibility that a massive asteroid could crash into Earth, prompt us to reflect on our own individual mortality and on human extinction. And when we think about the end of humanity, it raises questions about whether our efforts have value because, if human extinction does occur, the things that we have created will decay and eventually vanish. Some claim that our efforts are pointless if humanity will cease to exist. This claim will be examined and disputed in this essay.

In recent years, there has been extensive debate regarding the question of whether we have obligations to future generations, such as an obligation to preserve the environment. To a far lesser extent, there has also been discussion about the more basic question of whether it matters how long humanity will persist. The related question of whether our efforts have value if humanity will end has received even less attention.

The human species could become extinct abruptly, with all of us dying at once or within a short time of each other. Extinction could also occur gradually. For example, if people would immediately stop having children, then we would live out our lives in a world without future generations. Humanity would become extinct over a period of 110 to 120 years—the maximum life span of someone currently alive.

If we knew that humanity would become extinct within the next few months, then we would be justified in feeling distressed about this because it would cut short our expected life span, thereby depriving us of many potential experiences. However, should we feel anguish about the possibility that humankind will become extinct long after we and our loved ones have died?

I would like to thank an anonymous referee for valuable comments and suggestions.

It is understandable why we want those that we love, including our children and friends, to continue living after we have died. Because we love them, relate to them as one existent individual to another, and empathize with their feelings and aspirations, we desire for them to live on so that they can realize their goals and experience fulfilling lives. But why should it matter whether remote future generations—faceless, abstract persons who only potentially exist and whom we will never know—will be born after we have died and will persist for as long as possible?

Ernest Partridge contends that people have a "basic need" to care for the future beyond their own lifetimes, a need that he refers to as "self transcendence."[1] He writes:

> By claiming that there is a basic human need for "self transcendence," I am proposing that, as a result of the psychodevelopmental sources of the self and the fundamental dynamics of social experience, well-functioning human beings identify with, and seek to further, the well-being, preservation, and endurance of communities, locations, causes, artifacts, institutions, ideals, and so on, that are outside themselves and that they hope will flourish beyond their own lifetimes.[2]

In attempting to support his claim, Partridge argues that there is a "desire to extend the term of one's influence and significance well beyond the term of one's lifetime—a desire evident in arrangements for posthumous publications, in bequests and wills, in perpetual trusts (such as the Nobel Prize), and so forth."[3] Partridge concludes by asserting:

> To be sure, posterity does not actually exist *now*. Even so, in a strangely abstract and metaphorical sense, posterity may extend profound favors for the living. For posterity exists as an *idea*, a potentiality, and a valid object of transpersonal devotion, concern, purpose, and commitment. Without this idea and potentiality, our lives would be confined, empty, bleak, pointless, and morally impoverished.[4]

Allen Tough makes a similar argument to Partridge when he states: "If our future is highly negative [referring to the end of humanity], then most other values and goals will lose their point."[5]

In this essay, an attempt will be made to demonstrate that the claim that our lives would be empty and pointless without future generations is greatly exag-

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[1] Partridge uses the term "self transcendence" to mean extending one's influence beyond one's lifetime. Others use this word in a broader sense to mean extending one's influence or help to other people, regardless of whether they are future persons and so, to avoid confusion, this word will not be used.

[2] Ernest Partridge, "Why Care About the Future?" in *Responsibilities to Future Generations: Environmental Ethics*, ed. Ernest Partridge (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981), 204.

[3] Ibid., 209.

[4] Ibid., 217–218.

[5] Allen Tough, *Crucial Questions About the Future* (New York: UP of America, 1991), 12.

gerated. Second, it will be argued that, if we adopt a reasonable standard for judging whether our efforts are "significant," it then will not matter whether humanity will persist for an extended time.

BACKGROUND ON THE DEBATE

Many people have expressed a longing for humanity to persist for as long as possible. Wilhelm Ostwald, for example, argues that the continuation of a species is a way of mitigating the death of an individual member of that species. In the context of discussing the propagation of biological organisms, he writes: "Death has here lost much of his power; many individuals may perish, but the organism as such remains alive. Only when the very last of all the offspring perishes may death be regarded as the victor."[6] Avner de-Shalit expresses a similar view insofar as he argues that the idea of future generations helps people overcome the fear of death. He writes: "We can, to a certain extent, and should immortalize the creative part of us. True, this is not a total victory over the fear [of death], nor is it a full answer. Nevertheless, if we follow this course of action, it will provide us with a certain victory."[7]

In writing about "traces," as they are now called, Ostwald indicates: "Every man leaves after his death certain things in the world changed by his influence. He may have built a house, or gained a fortune, or written a book, or begotten children."[8] He goes on to argue: "There is a very general desire in mankind to leave such impressions" and "we are not fully satisfied with the mere existence of such objective souvenirs [referring to the pyramids], but want other people to see them and realize their meaning."[9]

The principal argument advanced by those who believe that it matters how long humanity will persist is as follows: People desire to leave an enduring trace of their existence and would not be satisfied in just leaving a physical trace. People want their trace (e.g., piece of artwork) to be appreciated by other people—not just to sit on a desolate planet for countless years. Leaving an appreciable, enduring trace is dependent on the existence of future generations. Therefore, it matters, they conclude, how long humanity will continue to exist.

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[6] Wilhelm Ostwald, *Individuality and Immortality* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906), 14. A scholar from various disciplines is invited each year to deliver the "Ingersoll Lecture on the Immortality of Man." At the time of his lecture, which was published in the book, Ostwald was a Professor of Physical Chemistry at the University of Leipzig and a Temporary Professor at Harvard University, where he delivered the lecture.

[7] Avner de-Shalit, *Why Posterity Matters: Environmental Policies and Future Generations* (London: Routledge, 1995), 38.

[8] Ostwald, op. cit., 53.

[9] Ibid., 54–55.

James Lenman convincingly argues that, from an impersonal standpoint, it does not matter whether humanity will become extinct sooner rather than later.[10] However, he does believe that this matters from a "generation-centered" perspective for reasons similar to those advanced by Partridge and de-Shalit.

It is true, as Partridge maintains, that some people do adopt goals that extend beyond the end of their lives. For example, in response to a question regarding the goal of a writer, William Faulkner remarks:

> It's—I think that a writer wants to make something that he knows that a hundred or two hundred or five hundred, a thousand years later will make people feel what they feel when they read Homer, or read Dickens or Balzac, Tolstoy . . . he knows he has a short span of life, that the day will come when he must pass through the wall of oblivion, and he wants to leave a scratch on that wall—Kilroy was here—that somebody a hundred, a thousand years later will see.[11]

Granted, if one's goal is to influence people for thousands of years through one's writings, then this goal could not be accomplished without the continued existence of humanity. However, the goal of leaving an enduring, appreciable trace is not important, as will be shown in a later section. Furthermore, adopting such a grandiose goal is unrealistic, especially considering the vast quantity of writings that are being produced and amassed by humanity. Although future persons may have more sophisticated technology than we do to sift through these writings, they (like us) will be limited in how much they can read. Therefore, it will be difficult for a contemporary writer to achieve the goal of influencing future persons for thousands of years.

Partridge argues that it should matter to us how long humanity will persist, but clearly this does not matter to everyone. For example, in response to the comments of an earlier presenter at a symposium, who had equated the 4.5 billion years of earth's history to once around the world in a plane, the economist Lester Thurow responded: "Do I care what happens a thousand years from now? Do I care when man gets off the airplane? And I think I basically came to the conclusion that I don't care whether man is on the airplane for another eight feet, or if man is on the airplane another three times around the earth."[12]

Thurow does not expound on why he does not care how long humanity will persist. However, for some people, a pessimistic outlook on life explains why they do not embrace the goal of achieving human immortality. According to the

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[10] James Lenman, "On Becoming Extinct," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 83 (2002), 253–69.

[11] William Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957–1958*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn & Joseph L. Blotner (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 61.

[12] Lester Thurow, "Zero Economic Growth and the Distribution of Income," *The Economic Growth Controversy*, eds. Andrew Weintraub, Eli Schwartz, & J. Richard Aronson (White Plains: International Arts and Sciences Press, Inc., 1973), 141–2.

noted pessimist Schopenhauer: "You can also look upon our life as an episode unprofitably disturbing the blessed calm of nothingness."[13] To those who believe that nonexistence is preferable to existence or that evil outweighs the good in the world, the goal that humanity will persist for billions of years undoubtedly seems irrational and perhaps even ridiculous. From their perspective, it is unlikely that this goal could be achieved considering the destructive behavior of humankind and, even if it could be achieved, we would never know it because we would no longer be alive then. Furthermore, achieving this goal would only prolong human suffering and misery and postpone the inevitable extinction of humankind. For example, Schopenhauer writes:

> If the act of procreation were neither the outcome of a desire nor accompanied by feelings of pleasure, but a matter to be decided on the basis of purely rational considerations, is it likely the human race would still exist? Would each of us not rather have felt so much pity for the coming generation as to prefer to spare it the burden of existence, or at least not wish to take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood?[14]

If one is miserable with one's life, then this person may wish that he or she had never been born, may assume that others also wish they had never been born, and thus may see themselves as doing future persons a favor by sparing them the "burden of existence." However, the assumption that everyone desires not to have been born must be false, because, if it were true, then there would be many more suicides than there are and people would not seek, as they do, to live as long as possible—some even wanting to live forever.

As extreme pessimism is uncommon, there must be other reasons explaining why it does not matter to some people, such as Thurow, whether humanity will endure for a long time. These reasons will become evident in the next section, where it will be demonstrated that the claim that our efforts would be pointless without future generations is an exaggeration.

LIFE WITHOUT FUTURE GENERATIONS

One can lead a meaningful life without personal immortality or a superior being, as many have argued.[15] If living forever, as an individual, is unnecessary for one's life to be meaningful, then this immediately raises doubt about whether

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[13] Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Suffering of the World," *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 47.

[14] Ibid., 47–48.

[15] See, for example, Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life," *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 101–132. Inaugural Lecture delivered at Canberra University College, 1957.

it is necessary for humanity to live forever, or for a long time, for one's life to be meaningful, as some claim. It will be useful, however, to examine their arguments in more detail.

Would our lives be "pointless" without future generations as Partridge claims? "Pointless" is a vague word and Partridge does not elaborate on what he means in using this word. Therefore, before addressing the question, it is important to attain a clear understanding of the meanings of this word. "Pointless" can mean the same as "purposeless," which signifies the *absence* of a goal or purpose. Clearly, living without the prospect of future generations is not pointless, in this sense of the word, because people alive today can have and pursue goals regardless of whether there will be future generations.

"Pointless" can also mean that one has a goal, but that it no longer makes sense to continue striving to achieve this goal because conditions have changed that have made the goal irrelevant or unachievable. In this sense of the word, "pointless" has a meaning very similar to "futile." Declaring that an action or activity will be futile means that it will be impossible or highly improbable that the action, no matter how often it will be repeated, will bring about *one's envisioned goal*. Therefore, whether or not an effort is considered futile or pointless will depend, in large part, on the nature of one's goals.[16]

A few of the goals that some people have would be pointless without future generations. For example, if one's goal is to write a book that will be read by and influence others for thousands of years, then, if it becomes known that humankind will perish within six months, this individual would consider the writing of this book pointless because the envisioned goal has become unachievable. Although the goal would be pointless, it is unrealistic to adopt such a goal in the first place.

Our lives, as a whole, would be pointless without future generations only if *all* of our efforts were devoted to achieving goals directed at future persons and this is not true. Most of peoples' goals can be accomplished within their lifetimes. If all of our goals extended well beyond our lifetimes, then we would not fully realize *any* of our goals until long after we have died. But people do accomplish many of their goals: they graduate from college, they get married, they pursue various careers, they write books, they travel, and so on—all without future generations.

Animals preceded human life by millions of years and may continue to exist for millions of years after humanity has become extinct. Some people have goals directed at assuring that other forms of life, especially animals, will survive and flourish, regardless of how long humanity will persist. Arne Naess argues that one

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[16] For a more detailed analysis and discussion of the concept of futility, see Brooke Alan Trisel, "Futility and the Meaning of Life Debate," *Sorites* 14 (October 2002), 70–84. http://www.sorites.org/Issue_14/trisel.htm

of the values underlying the "deep ecology" movement is the principle of "biospherical egalitarianism." He writes:

> The ecological field-worker acquires a deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life. He reaches an understanding from within, a kind of understanding that others reserve for fellow men and for a narrow section of ways and forms of life. To the ecological field-worker, *the equal right to live and blossom* is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom.[17]

Paul Taylor outlines a "biocentric outlook" on nature.[18] One of the four components of this outlook is that human beings are members of Earth's community of life and hold that membership on the same terms as nonhuman members. He expresses the desire to maintain the "integrity of the biosphere" for the good of human and nonhuman members of the community of life. Taylor argues that if human extinction should occur that "not only would the Earth's community of life continue to exist, but in all probability, its well-being would be enhanced."[19]

As Taylor's goal extends beyond humanity to include animals and plants, pursuing this goal would not be pointless even if humanity will become extinct because achieving this goal does not depend on the continued existence of humanity. In fact, as he argues, the continued existence of humanity actually makes it more difficult to achieve the goal that animals will survive. Those who argue that our lives would be pointless without future generations falsely assume that everyone's goals revolve around and are limited to human beings.

For the preceding reasons, it is an overstatement to claim that our efforts would be pointless without future generations. If one's goals do not extend beyond one's lifetime or are directed at nonhuman life, then it may be possible to achieve these goals even if there will be no future generations.

Wanting to influence humanity forever would be pointless without future generations, but this should not concern us. Trying to run a marathon in five minutes, and attempting to jump to the moon from Earth, are also pointless. These latter two activities are pointless because these goals exceed human capabilities and are unachievable. No matter how much effort is expended, one could never achieve these goals. Wanting to leave an everlasting trace of ourselves also exceeds human capabilities and is unachievable. If a person would try to jump to the moon or to leave a trace that will last *forever*, then this person's efforts related to these goals

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[17] Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary," *Inquiry* 16 (1973), 95–100.

[18] Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1998), 71–86.

[19] Ibid., 76.

will be futile. However, they would not be justified in feeling distressed about this because they chose unrealistic goals, which primarily is why their efforts toward achieving these goals would be futile.

It does not concern us that we cannot jump to the moon because we understand that human beings have limits and that a jump of this magnitude far exceeds our capabilities. We accept this limitation and do not fret about it, yet some people resist accepting the limitation that they cannot leave an everlasting, appreciable trace of themselves. By accepting this limitation and adopting realistic goals, it will help assure that our efforts will not be pointless.

In addition to claiming that our lives would be pointless without future generations, Partridge also claims that our lives would be "empty" and "bleak" without future generations because purportedly we could not satisfy the desire or goal to leave an enduring trace of ourselves without them. This, however, falsely assumes that having and achieving goals are the only experiences that make living worthwhile. Even more incorrect, it assumes that being able to achieve one kind of goal, namely a goal that extends beyond one's life and is directed at future persons, is the only experience that makes life worth living.

Having and achieving goals can give us a sense of purpose, direction, and satisfaction, but these are not the only experiences that make living worthwhile. There are other commendable aspects of life, such as aesthetic appreciation and being with family and friends, which may have little or nothing to do with goal-directed activity. Therefore, it is untrue that our lives would be empty and bleak without future generations.

In contrast to those who have goals that extend beyond their lives, people who are not achievement-oriented, or are achievement-oriented but who set realistic goals, may not care whether humanity will persist for a long time. Having goals that extend beyond the end of their lives may be common among those who produce creative works such as writers and artists, but are these goals that prevalent among ordinary people, as those who long for future generations suggest? It is doubtful that individuals whose profession involves providing a service, such as delivering the mail, or caring for a patient in the hospital, really care whether they will leave a trace of their existence that will last thousands of years. Their goals and interests may not extend much, if any, beyond the point at which they, and those that they love, will cease living. Consequently, it may not matter to them whether humanity will persist for a long time.

What if there are objective values independent of human subjective evaluation, as some believe? If there are objective values, then a discrepancy could occur between what we think is important and what is important according to this objective standard. We could conclude that it does not matter how long humanity will continue to exist when it really does matter or that it does matter when it really does not.

Let us suppose that there is a god who has given us objective standards declaring what is right and wrong and what is significant and insignificant and that we have somehow discovered the following standard:

a. The things that human beings create are significant regardless of how long they will last.

If there were such an objective standard, then our creations would be significant regardless of what we think of them and regardless of whether future persons validate that they are significant. Even if humanity would be wiped out next month, creating things would not be pointless since the significance of these creations does not depend on how long they will last.

If there are no objective standards, as I believe, then the question becomes what criteria should be selected to decide what is and what is not significant. With the standard considered above, we do not know why this god considers our creations significant, but we do know that the length of time that our creations will last is not one of the criteria used by this god to judge significance.

The standards that we adopt are based upon our desires and goals. Reflecting their goals, some people adopt the following standard to judge significance:

b. My creations are significant only if they will be appreciated by others for a long time.

If people adopt this standard, then whether or not their creations are considered significant will depend on how long these creations will be appreciated which, in turn, will depend on how long humanity will last. This raises the fundamental question of whether long-lastingness should be part of a standard for judging significance. As will be argued in greater detail later, including long-lastingness as one of the criteria for judging the significance of our efforts is unreasonable and unwise.

THE END OF THE UNIVERSE

It is important to distinguish the end of humanity from the end of the universe since the universe may continue to exist and be habitable to life for a long time after humanity becomes extinct. At a time at which a few scientists were predicting that the universe would ultimately end in "heat death"—a prediction based upon generalizing (inappropriately, some would argue) the Second Law of Thermodynamics to the whole universe—Bertrand Russell wrote the following famous words:

> all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.[20]

Despite these gloomy words, Russell did not conclude that living is pointless or bleak if humanity or the universe will eventually end. However, some people do reach this conclusion.

John Barrow and Frank Tipler, in outlining the much-debated "Anthropic Cosmological Principle," and in reaction to Russell's comments quoted above, write:

> Though our species is doomed, our civilization and indeed the values we care about may not be. We emphasized . . . that from the behavioral point of view intelligent *machines* can be regarded as people. These machines may be our ultimate heirs, our ultimate descendants, because under certain circumstances they could survive forever the extreme conditions near the Final State. Our civilization may be continued indefinitely by them, and the values of humankind may thus be transmitted to an arbitrarily distant futurity.[21]

We realize that we will die long before the universe will end. Nevertheless, some people are distressed with the thought that the universe may end one way or another. In fact, they may feel more distress thinking about the end of the universe than about the extinction of humankind. What is the explanation for this? It will be hypothesized that the level of distress that one feels about the possibility that the universe will end varies with the nature of one's goals (e.g., whether one wants to leave an everlasting trace), one's theory of value, and one's religious beliefs.

Before exploring these relations, it will be useful to clarify what the "end" of the universe means, as the "end" could be thought of in many different ways. The end of the universe could be thought of as the last event. It might also be thought of as a point at which the universe vanishes into nothingness, if one assumed this was possible. For the purposes of this discussion, the end of the universe will be defined as a point at which the universe has become irreversibly inhospitable to life and has irreversibly lost all traces of its prior states.

As discussed in the previous section, some people have goals that are not dependent on the continued existence of humanity. However, achieving these

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[20] Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," *Why I Am Not a Christian, and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 107. Originally published in *The Independent Review*, 1903.

[21] John D. Barrow & Frank J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 615.

goals may be dependent on the universe having certain characteristics, such as being habitable to life. For example, it would not be possible for animals or ecosystems to survive after the extinction of humankind if the universe ends shortly after humanity does. If people think of animals as having only instrumental value to human beings, then this scenario will not concern them. However, if they believe that certain aspects of nature, such as animals, are intrinsically valuable,[22] then the destruction of the universe would signify the loss of these values.

Some people want to leave an enduring, appreciable trace and do not believe that there is a god who will outlast the universe or that there are objective values. They are consoled in believing that their friends and loved ones will persist after they have died and that they will live on in their memories and may continue to exert an influence in their lives. But if everyone else dies shortly after they do, and humanity becomes extinct, then no one would be left to remember them or to be affected by their efforts. However, if the universe has not ended, then there is a possibility and thus hopefulness, they conclude, that a trace demonstrating that they lived could be left to a nonhuman, rational species. They might imagine that another intelligent life form, either one that will come into existence on Earth in the future, or one that currently exists elsewhere on another planet, will discover the traces of their existence or adopt human values.[23] Fulfilling this desire, however, would not be possible if the universe becomes inhospitable to life, which explains why they feel distressed reflecting about the end of the universe.

In a sign of desperation to achieve quasi-immortality,[24] Barrow and Tipler suggest that our values could be "transmitted" to indestructible machines that might be able to survive the death of the universe. Would this satisfy people who seek to leave an enduring, appreciable trace? If these machines were programmed by human beings, then any appreciation these machines would have for our works would be nothing more than human commanded appreciation; the machines would "appreciate" our works because we instructed them to do so. If we program the machines to clap after reciting our writings, are they clapping for us or are we, through the machines, just clapping for ourselves? I believe that the latter answer is correct and therefore seriously doubt whether leaving a trace to a

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[22] See, for example, Paul Taylor, op. cit. He argues that all living things have "inherent worth."

[23] See, for example, Paul Davies, *The Last Three Minutes: Conjectures About the Ultimate Fate of The Universe* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994) for speculation such as this. Like Barrow and Tipler, the physicist Davies speculates about how it might be possible for robotic "descendants" to survive the death of the universe.

[24] The term "quasi-immortality" will be used to mean leaving a trace of ourselves that will be appreciated forever.

machine will satisfy anyone who wants to have their works appreciated by others.

Those who desire personal immortality despair at the thought that the universe will end,[25] which explains, in part, why they embrace the idea of a self-sufficient and eternal God. They are comforted in believing that, with God, there is hope for never-ending life even if the universe will end. However, if one has a pantheistic conception of god and worships either the universe itself or certain characteristics of the universe, such as its creative ability, and does not believe that there is a changeless reality underlying the universe, then the destruction of the universe may signify the death of god to this person.

ESCALATING DESIRES, ESCALATING STANDARDS

When we adopt an imaginary perspective[26] that extends beyond the end of humanity, and look back on our achievements, some people tend to devalue these achievements. The achievements no longer seem to be of significance when viewed from this distant vantage point. For example, William Lane Craig, who argues that life has no "ultimate" significance without God and personal immortality, indicates:

> Mankind is a doomed race in a dying universe. Because the human race will eventually cease to exist, it makes no ultimate difference whether it ever did exist. . . . The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good men everywhere to better the lot of the human race—all these come to nothing. In the end they don't make one bit of difference, not one bit.[27]

Craig, in effect, devalues human achievements by arguing that they all "come to nothing" and make no difference. According to this reasoning, any achievements that humanity does make will cease once humanity ends and, consequently, they will not lead to further achievements or to a significant culmination that could be considered to have been the purpose of life.[28]

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[25] See, for example, the quotation from William Lane Craig in the next section of this essay.

[26] For an in-depth analysis of the external perspective, see Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), esp. 208–231.

[27] William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life Without God," *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 42. Originally published in *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologies*, 1994.

[28] For a reply to the argument that life is a journey leading nowhere, see Paul Edwards, "Meaning and Value of Life," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 4, 467–77. Edwards argues (p. 471) that "striving is not pointless if it achieves what it is intended to achieve even if it is without *final* consequence. . . ." See also Thomas

Historical achievements may be devalued because they may appear to lead nowhere and end in defeat when we look at them from a broad perspective. However, once this retrospective devaluation occurs, it is typically not long before one also begins to question the worth of all future efforts. For example, Miguel de Unamuno writes: "Yes, but what I work at, will not that too be lost in the end? And if it be lost, wherefore should I work at it?"[29] Similarly, the novelist Leo Tolstoy, in the midst of his well-known existential crisis, writes: "My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why, then, do anything?"[30]

What leads a person such as Tolstoy to devalue his earlier efforts (he refers to them as "delusions") and then to question the worth of *all* human efforts? This can occur when we *increase the standard* that we have previously used to evaluate whether our efforts were significant and effective. Tolstoy, in describing an earlier period in his life, indicates that, regarding the question of how we should live our lives, he believed, at that time, that "progress" was the answer. He writes: "I tried to reach intellectual perfection; I studied everything I could, everything that life gave me a chance to study. I tried to perfect my will and set up rules for myself that I endeavored to follow. . . ."[31]

Thus, at that point in his life, Tolstoy evaluated whether his efforts were significant based on whether improvement was occurring or, in his words, whether "Everything is developing, and I am developing. . . ."[32] However, later in his life, when he looks back on his many accomplishments from a broad perspective, he greatly expands his original goal, which in turn leads him to increase his original standard for judging significance—seemingly unaware that he did so. His revised goal is not simply to have created excellent works and to have made progress. If that were still the standard that he used to judge significance, then he would not belittle his accomplishments, but would uphold them. Rather, he, in effect, amends his prior standard (i.e., to make "progress") with a new condition: that his works will not be "forgotten," which is an indirect way of saying that he wants them to be remembered forever.

Nagel, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1971), 716–27. Nagel argues that an activity does not have to be followed by another activity to justify pursuing the first activity. Although Nagel indicates that the standard arguments for absurdity fail as arguments, he concludes (p. 718) that "they attempt to express something that is difficult to state, but fundamentally correct."

[29] Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Flitch (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), 231. English translation originally published by Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1921.

[30] Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, trans. David Patterson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 30. Originally published as *Ispoved* in 1884.

[31] Ibid., 17.

[32] Ibid., 23.

We may believe that longing for immortality, either for personal immortality or for our works to be remembered or appreciated forever, is irrational since immortality is unachievable. Nevertheless, the desire for long-lastingness has a way of creeping into our standards. For example, consider the following standard:

c. If my works will be destroyed, then my efforts will have been futile.

Although not explicit, the desire for quasi-immortality is very much a part of the standard outlined above, hidden behind indirect ways of expressing our true desires and the vagueness of the word "futile." The higher one's aspirations are, the more likely it is that the efforts associated with bringing about these goals will be considered futile or ineffective. For example, if we seek to have our works last forever, then, at some point, we will probably conclude that our efforts are futile since this goal is unachievable. However, if we have more realistic aspirations, such as wanting to create an excellent work product, regardless of how long it will be appreciated by others, then we would be much less likely to conclude that our efforts at achieving this goal are futile.

If people set a goal and then accomplish the envisioned goal, they would not conclude that their efforts were ineffective or made no difference unless there is something in addition to this goal that they were seeking that remains unrealized. As argued, this additional condition that may indirectly creep into our standards is for our works to last forever, which is simply the reverse and a more direct way of saying that we do not want them to be destroyed. By rephrasing the standard to fill in the hidden information, as follows, it then becomes clear that the standard reflects the desire to achieve quasi-immortality:

c′. If my works will be destroyed (i.e., not last forever), then my efforts will have been futile.

If one adopts the above, unreasonable standard for judging significance, then this person will likely decide, at some point, that it is not worthwhile to produce any creative works. Furthermore, they will not even consider it worth the effort to address a disvalue. For example, suppose that a young girl has fallen down a well and is in excruciating pain.[33] Soon after, the father of the child learns that the human race will perish in two weeks. If the father turned to the people around him at the top of the well, as his daughter screams in pain below, and said, "helping her is pointless since we will all be dead in two weeks," the other people around him would likely look at him with disgust and then proceed to pull the girl out of the well.

[33] Example adapted from one used by anonymous referee in comments.

The father adopted the following unreasonable standard for judging worthwhileness by allowing his desire for long-lastingness to become part of the standard:

d. Helping my daughter is worthwhile only if humanity will endure for more than two weeks.

This standard leads him to rationalize that no action should be taken to relieve her suffering. What would have been a reasonable standard to use for judging whether it was worthwhile to help the child? It would have been the following standard used by the people who decided to help the girl:

e. Helping the girl is worthwhile if it will relieve her pain and suffering.

By the time a desire has been turned into a standard, it has likely become quite intense. At that point, it is no longer simply one of many desires that a person has. It may be desired more than anything else and is something that a person feels that he or she *must* have for life to be worth living. Some who have such a desire then make exaggerated claims in an attempt to defend this desire to others who may not value, as much as they do, if at all, the thing or experience that is desired. For example, they argue that if there is no immortality (i.e., if this desire for immortality cannot be satisfied), then "life is futile."[34] Just because personal immortality is unachievable does not mean that *all* of our efforts are futile. In other words, there are many goals that we can achieve, and desires that we can satisfy, even if we cannot satisfy this one desire to live forever.

The problem in allowing an unrealizable desire, such as immortality, to become part of a standard for judging whether our efforts are worthwhile or important is that it predetermines that we will fail to achieve the standard. Furthermore, it can lead us to lose sight of or discount all of the other things that matter to us besides fulfilling this one desire, as, for example, when the father concludes that helping his daughter is not worthwhile.

Since there is no way to satisfy the desire for quasi-immortality, one may fall into a state of despair, as did Tolstoy. Furthermore, because the desire may be concealed in the standard, the person may be unable to pinpoint the source of the despair and, consequently, may be unable to figure out how to overcome it. The person may believe that he or she has a new perspective on life that suddenly revealed that human endeavors are and have always been futile, when, in fact, the only thing that changed was that this person increased the standard that he or

[34] See, for example, Craig, op. cit., 53–54. He argues that "life is futile" without personal immortality and God.

she had previously used to judge significance. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize when an unrealizable desire, such as the desire to have our works appreciated forever, has infected our standards and, when it has done so, to purge it from these standards. The original standard that we used to judge significance was likely realistic and inspiring before it became corrupted with the desire to achieve quasi-immortality.

Suppose that there is a god who created humanity and who told us that our efforts would be "significant" only if we create works that will last forever. Suppose also that humanity will not last forever and that we live in a universe that will not likely last forever. Thus, there is a clear, "objective" standard for judging whether our efforts are significant. If this were the standard handed down to us by this god, would we try to achieve the standard, or would we reject, as I believe, the standard on grounds that it is unreasonable, assuming that we were not compelled by this god to try to achieve the standard? Ironically, we are free to choose a reasonable standard to judge what is significant, yet some people unwittingly adopt, or impose upon themselves, a standard that they would reject if it had been imposed upon them by an external entity.

LEAVING AN EVERLASTING TRACE IS UNIMPORTANT

As explained, the desire to have our works endure forever can creep into our standards for judging significance, which raises the following questions that should be explored. What is the ultimate goal(s) we are trying to accomplish in leaving an enduring trace? Do these goals make sense? Are they important?

Robert Nozick suggests that leaving a trace may "indicate that a person's life had a certain meaning or importance . . . ."[35] He also points out that leaving a trace may be considered intrinsically important. However, he then questions whether long-lastingness should be considered important and suggests that it should not be.[36]

When people say that they would like to have an influence on future persons through their works, this sounds like a grand goal and we may be impressed, but why is this goal considered important? The importance attributed to this goal reflects two underlying relations. First, there is a relation between how challenging a goal is and how important we consider the goal; a challenging goal, such as seeking to influence future persons for hundreds of years, is considered more important than a goal that is easily met. Second, as Nozick comments on, there is a philosophic tradition that equates long-lastingness with importance; that which lasts is often valued more highly than that which does not.

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[35] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981), 584.
[36] Ibid., 585.

Is a work product important because it endures or does it endure because it is important? Just because something may last a long time does not necessarily indicate that it is important; long-lastingness does not lead to importance. Rather, if people consider a creation important because of the influence it had on them, or because of the contribution it made to a field of inquiry, or for other reasons, they seek to preserve the work and, consequently, it endures. Importance comes first, then long-lastingness. Thus, there is a relation between long-lastingness and importance, but the relation is the opposite of what is often thought.

As indicated in the earlier quotation from Faulkner, some suggest that they write for posterity. It is understandable if one writes for one's contemporaries and future persons or for just one's contemporaries, but it is peculiar why someone would focus solely on influencing future persons. Perhaps they believe that their creations will be ignored or undervalued by their contemporaries, for whatever reason, and that the true significance of their works will not be recognized until future persons come across them. Although there are a few exceptions (e.g., Schopenhauer), it is rare for someone's creations to be disregarded initially, but later considered important. Alternatively, they may believe that it is preferable to create works for future persons instead of for their contemporaries, but might not have or give a reason for, or have really thought about, the value judgement they are making. If they consider it more important to influence posterity than their contemporaries simply because future persons will exist at a later time, then this is strange and unjustified.

A person may have many different motivations in wanting to leave an enduring trace. The ultimate goal of a writer, for example, may be to achieve everlasting fame. Alternatively, the writer may be seeking to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and/or feelings of future persons. The writer, through insights and wisdom contained in the book, may also be seeking to help future persons cope with various problems.

Finally, if people have spent most of their lives working on projects that will be uncompleted when they die, they may want their work products to endure so that future generations can eventually complete the projects, thereby making it possible for them to achieve their goals posthumously. For example, if a team of medical researchers has worked to develop a vaccine to prevent a disease, but have not completed the work by the end of their lives, they may want their work products to endure so that future generations can eventually realize the goal of developing the vaccine so that future persons will not suffer from the disease. The researchers may want future generations to accomplish this goal that they worked toward, but may also derive a sense of pride and importance in believing that future generations will appreciate and admire the contribution they made in helping to develop the vaccine. If the researchers do not believe that their work will endure and, consequently, do not believe that it will be possible to

achieve their envisioned goal of reducing human suffering by preventing this disease, then they may conclude that their efforts to develop the vaccine were unproductive and wasteful.

As outlined above, some of the reasons why people want to leave an enduring trace appear, *on the surface*, to be altruistic and others are related to satisfying their own desires. Regarding the apparent altruistic reasons, if people desire future generations so that they can accomplish goals that extend beyond the end of their lives, and if these goals are directed at helping or influencing (presumably in a positive way) future persons, then the conclusion would logically follow that they desire future generations so that they can help or influence them. But is the second premise of the argument true? We will now turn our attention to exploring this question.

If future persons currently existed, or if it were inevitable that they would exist at some point, then the goal of wanting to help or influence them would make sense and may be a worthy goal. However, future generations do not currently exist and it is not inevitable that they will exist. They may or may not be created depending on our behavior and the choices that we make. Therefore, those who desire future generations must be saying one of two things. First, they could be saying that *if future generations are created*, for whatever reasons, that they would like to help or influence them, which may reflect an altruistic motivation. On the other hand, they could be saying something quite different: that they specifically *want future generations to be created* so that they can help or influence them. If this is the reason they desire future generations, then this is quite odd, and not altruistic, but self-serving.

If a person's goal is to help or to have a positive influence on other people, then future generations are not needed to accomplish this goal. There are plenty of people around today who need help and whom we can attempt to influence how they feel or what they believe if that is our desire. Future persons are needed, however, for people to achieve goals directed at helping or influencing these future persons. But wanting people to be created so that one can then turnaround and help them cope with living, or influence how they view or relate to the world, through the traces that one has left, is a poor reason to desire future persons, if that is the real reason that a person wants humanity to endure for a long time.

Is the desire for humanity to persist for a long time reflective of an ultimate desire to influence or help future persons, through the traces that we have left, or is it mainly about wanting to have our works, and the other traces of our existence, appreciated so that we can derive a sense of importance from believing that this may occur? Let us explore this question. Many of us value the creations of our ancestors and so we assume that future generations will also value our works. Suppose that this is a false assumption. Suppose instead that people in the future did not value us or our works. Imagine that they despised our creations,

including our paintings, music, and philosophic treatises. They considered our works so trivial that they destroyed them and even went so far as to make it look as if we had never existed. However, they relied on the medicines that we had created, claimed that they had created them, and these medicines helped them survive and flourish.

Under the scenario outlined above, would we still want these future persons to persist for as long as possible or would this no longer matter to us? If the latter answer is correct, as I suspect, then this suggests that the goal of wanting intelligent life to persist forever—whether it is human life or a nonhuman rational species, if it is thought that humanity will become extinct—is less about wanting to help them and more about wanting to have our works and our lives be considered important. By destroying our creations, and trivializing our existence by denying that we ever existed, these future persons would be taking away the sense of pride and importance that we derived from believing that our works would influence and be appreciated by them.

These future persons remembered us, at least collectively. Therefore, if it is true that it would no longer matter to us, under the circumstances described above, how long they will persist, then this suggests that people want more than just to be remembered by future persons. People, at least those who are achievement-oriented, want to be remembered and thought of as individuals who made a difference, meaning that the world was a better place because they lived. This would explain why obituaries typically contain not just a person's name, but also a list of the person's accomplishments.

For artists, writers, and other achievement-oriented people, the desire to have their works be considered important by future persons is much stronger than the distinct,[37] but related desire to simply be remembered. If they thought that their creations would be considered influential by future persons, but that they would eventually be forgotten, they could probably accept this. However, if they thought that future persons would lose, destroy, or ignore their work, but would remember them—unassociated from their work—then this would not likely be acceptable to them.

If people want to influence future persons, but believe that future persons will destroy their creations, then they would consider their efforts at influencing future persons pointless. Similarly, if we lived in a universe where the things that we created, such as our writings, were destroyed as soon as they were completed, without apparent reason, it would lead us to question the value of our creative pursuits. If one desired to write an essay but knew that it was certain that the essay, and all notes used in developing the essay, would be destroyed as soon as

[37] Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting that I distinguish between the desire to be appreciated in the future and the desire simply to be remembered.

the essay was completed, would one still write the essay? This will depend on the reasons why the person is writing the essay. Writing the essay would be considered pointless if one's goal is to have the essay read by other people. In contrast, if one is writing the essay as a way to stimulate one's thinking or to clarify one's thoughts, then this person will conclude that writing the essay is not pointless even though the essay will be destroyed.

In the universe described above, where the things that we create are destroyed immediately upon their completion, our creative pursuits may still be considered worthwhile, depending upon the nature of our goals. However, if we lived in a universe where not just the things that we create are destroyed upon their completion, but all of the intermediate steps leading up to the creation are also undone, including losing any thoughts stimulated by the activity, then all of our creative endeavors would be considered futile, especially if it were certain that our efforts would be undone. People could write an essay, but it would be as if they never did it. No traces, of any kind, would remain of their efforts. No matter what their goal was in writing the essay, whether it was to stimulate their own thinking or to be read by others, their goal could never be achieved.

Fortunately, we do not live in a universe where our creations are destroyed immediately upon their completion, or all of our efforts, including intermediate advances, are undone as soon as we complete a project. Our works will not last forever, but they generally endure long enough for us to achieve our goals in creating the works. Furthermore, the achievements that we have made are not reversible. In defending his theistic views, Charles Hartshorne writes: "If the humanist does not believe in racial immortality, then he looks forward to a time when all our achievements will be exactly as if they had never been."[38] Granted, the *things* we have created will eventually vanish once human beings are no longer around to preserve them. However, *achievements are events*, not things, and events that have occurred cannot be undone or reversed. Therefore, it will continue to be true that our achievements occurred even if humanity ends. One disadvantage of having an unalterable past is that we cannot undo a wrongdoing that occurred. However, an unalterable past is also an advantage in that our achievements can never be undone, which may give some consolation to those who desire quasi-immortality.

CONCLUSION

Although our works will not last forever, this should not matter if we accomplished what we set out to do when we created these works. Wanting our

[38] Charles Hartshorne, *Beyond Humanism: Essays in the Philosophy of Nature* (Lincoln, 1937; rpt. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1975), 12.

creations to endure forever was not likely part of our goal when we created them. If we accomplish our goals and then later in life conclude that these accomplishments were of no significance, then this is a sign that a desire for long-lastingness has crept into the standards that we use to judge significance. Escalating desires can lead to escalating standards since the standards that we establish reflect our goals and desires.

Including long-lastingness as a criterion for judging the significance of our efforts is unreasonable. If one includes long-lastingness as part of the standard, then one will feel that it is necessary for humanity to persist forever. There is no need for humanity to live forever for our lives and works to be significant. If the standard that we adopt for judging significance does not include long-lastingness as part of the standard, then it will not matter whether humanity will endure for a long time.

Like Tolstoy, we may be unable to keep from wanting to have our achievements remembered forever. We may also be unable to keep from wanting our works to be appreciated forever. But we can refrain from turning these desires into standards for judging whether our efforts and accomplishments are significant. If we can keep from doing this, it will be to our advantage. Then, during those times when we look back on life from an imagined perspective that encompasses times after humanity has become extinct, we will not conclude that our efforts amounted to nothing. Rather, we will conclude that many people made remarkable accomplishments that made their lives, and possibly the lives of others, better than they would have been if these goals had never been pursued. And if we expand our evaluation, as we should, to take into account all experiences associated with living, not just goal-related experiences, we will conclude not that life was empty, but that living was worthwhile.