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Unfinished Business

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Introduction

According to an intriguing though somewhat enigmatic line of thought, if humanity went extinct any time soon this would be unfortunate because important business would be left unfinished. Since there is work left for humanity to do, it would be regrettable, all else equal, if history ended before the relevant tasks could be completed. Call this thought *Unfinished Business*.[1]

To briefly motivate Unfinished Business, consider that something remarkable has occurred in our species' history. In the span of an evolutionary blink of an eye, our species has gone from foraging for food and fending off predators to splitting atoms and cracking its own genetic code. Our closest living primate relatives, chimpanzees and bonobos, live much like they have for millions of years. For reasons not yet fully understood, changes in the human lineage have put us on a radically novel and unpredictable developmental trajectory.[2] As a consequence, the question of what chimpanzees and bonobos will be like in 200 years is far less interesting (and frankly less scary) than the question of what humans will be like in 200 years.

Consider, next, that compared to the roughly 300,000-year history of our species and the roughly 12,000-year history since the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution, in which our ancestors traded hunting and foraging for sedentary agricultural life, many of the most exciting breakthroughs in science, culture, technology, politics, and morality have occurred only recently. The beginning of the abolition of legally entrenched social and political hierarchies is barely 200 years old; the great discoveries of relativity and quantum mechanics are around 100 years old; the internet is a couple of decades old; the decoding of the human genome is roughly 20 years old.

When contemplating such facts, one's reaction to the thought of immanent human extinction might not be "Oh no! All that loss of future

1. Remarks suggestive of this idea can be found in Adams (1989, 472–473), Bell (1993, 31–32), Bennett (1978, 66–68), Bostrom (2013, 23), Kavka (1978, 196–197), Ord (2020, 49–50), Slaughter (1994, 1078), and Tonn (2009, 428–431).

2. For overviews of the modern scientific attempt to understand these changes, see Fuentes (2017), Renfrew (2008), and Tattersal (2012).

well-being!" (cf. Bostrom 2003; Kavka 1978; Ord 2020; Parfit 1984) or "Oh no! Everything I love and non-instrumentally value will be snuffed out!" (cf. Frick 2017; Scheffler 2018; Wallace 2021). Instead, one's reaction might be something like "Oh no! Surely it isn't over yet! That can't be the end of the story! We're not done yet!" Jonathan Bennett articulates his reaction to the thought of human extinction along these lines:

> My attitude to mankind's future is conditioned by my attitude to its past: my sense that it would be a shame if the story stopped soon is nourished by my sense that it has been an exciting story that involves some long-term endeavours that aren't yet complete. (1978, 67)

Bennett's thought seems to be that extinction would somehow leave the human project objectionably incomplete. Given humanity's peculiar historical trajectory and potential, some things remain unfinished, and because of this, immanent extinction would represent an unwelcome rupture in the history of our species.

Yet what could it possibly mean to say that the human project is objectionably incomplete? What is the business that humanity needs to finish? And what exactly is the value at stake in finishing that business? Is it really plausible that not finishing that business is one of extinction's bad-making features, giving us reason to hope that history will continue? My aim in this paper is to offer an interpretation of Unfinished Business that begins to answer these questions. I will not be primarily concerned to defend the view against objections or to compare it to other proposals for explaining extinction's badness. Rather, my primary aim is to begin to articulate, in a frankly exploratory spirit, what a plausible interpretation of the view might amount to. Since the view has so far not been developed in detail, I will be content if my discussion helps to clarify what this option might plausibly look like and what it may contribute to our ethical thinking about humanity's future.

One reason Unfinished Business is interesting is that it offers an alternative to one of the dominant paradigms for explaining extinction's badness. According to this paradigm, extinction any time soon would come at a massive opportunity cost in terms of achievable welfare over the lifetime of our species or our species' descendants (Bostrom 2003; MacAskill 2022, 9–28, 167–190; Ord 2020, 43–46, 235–238, 259; Parfit 1984, 453–454).[3] As long as conditions are hospitable to human flourishing and the ratio of happy to unhappy lives remains favorable, it will be good for humanity to continue surviving and bad for humanity to go extinct. In what follows, I refer to this view as *Opportunity Cost*. Opportunity Cost centers on the injunction of welfare promotion, where this injunction ranges over all possible lives that could feasibly be actualized.

For all its apparent elegance, Opportunity Cost relies on controversial assumptions in population ethics. In particular, it relies on the assumption that adding happy lives to the world makes the world impartially better and that the goodness of possible lives is *pro tanto* reason to realize those lives. Not everyone accepts these assumptions. Some philosophers are moved by what John Broome (2004, 143) calls the "intuition of neutrality," that adding more happy lives to the world is axiologically neutral, making the world neither better nor worse. And some accept a normative claim corresponding to this purely evaluative one, *viz*. that the goodness of possible lives is no reason to realize those lives (e.g., Bennett 1978; Frick 2017; Heyd 1988; Narveson 1973).

Yet many of these same philosophers take what Bennett calls a "pro-humanity stand" (1978, 67), believing that it would be good for humanity to continue and bad for it to go extinct. If Unfinished Business can be suitably developed, it may offer a way of taking a pro-humanity stand while accepting axiological neutrality. Bennett rejects the idea that the utilities of possible people give us a reason to create those people. He nonetheless suggests that humanity's great "biological and spiritual adventure" seems worth continuing and alludes to the possibility of a *prima facie* duty to finish "important business" (Bennett

3. I use the term "opportunity cost" in a loose sense here. In its standard (deliberative) sense, opportunity cost refers to the disvalue of an option in terms of the foregone value of an alternative option. Here, I use it in a wider (axiological) sense to refer to the relative disvalue of a future trajectory of the world compared to a feasible alternative trajectory.

1978, 66–68). Bennett ultimately takes his stand to be unprincipled and a matter of personal preference (1978, 68–69); hence, he does not appear to think of his claims as providing practical or attitudinal justification that ought to be found convincing by others. But it is worth examining ideas in the vicinity to see if they reveal normative reasons that plausibly do contribute to providing such a justification. There are a range of other attempts to reconcile an anti-extinction ethic with the claim that adding happy lives is axiologically or normatively neutral (e.g., Finneron-Burns 2017; Frick 2017; Kaczmarek and Beard 2020). Unfinished Business may expand the options for philosophers wishing to pursue this project of reconciliation.

However, Unfinished Business may be interesting as a supplement rather than an alternative to Opportunity Cost. My own view is that it is plausible that bringing a happy person into the world bestows a (non-comparative) benefit on that person, and that this might be at least a weak *pro tanto* reason to do so (cf. McMahan 2013; Parfit 2017). Consequently, I tend to think that Opportunity Cost may provide a partial explanation of extinction's badness. But even if it does, it need not provide a complete explanation. There are plausibly a variety of reasons why extinction would be bad (some of these are canvassed in Bostrom 2013 and Ord 2020). If so, then, even if one accepts Opportunity Cost, Unfinished Business may be interesting because it sheds light on a distinct dimension of extinction's badness.

My aim in what follows is to offer an interpretation of Unfinished Business that (1) captures its intuitive appeal, (2) is consistent with plausible constraints, and (3) makes it non-redundant to other views in the literature (i.e., shows how it represents a distinctive kind of explanation for extinction's badness). As I understand it, the intuition behind Unfinished Business can be cashed out, at a first pass, as a cultural explanation of extinction's badness. Roughly, the idea is that certain further developments in culture would be good, and that extinction would be bad insofar as, and because, it closes off the possibility of realizing these further developments. The question is how to spell this out.[4] The next section begins with a brief adumbration of the view. Subsequent sections unpack it further.

1. A Cultural Explanation

Socially learned and transmitted information is more widespread in the animal world than had once been assumed. Nevertheless, cultural learning, innovation, and change have taken on new dimensions in our species — and to radical effect (Boyd et al. 2011; Henrich 2016). We are cumulative cultural learners capable of complex symbolic thought who have built intricate material and cultural worlds that have fundamentally altered human experience and capacity over time. As a result, we have been launched on a novel and unpredictable developmental trajectory.

Ian Tattersal concludes his survey of hominin evolution with the following meditation on humanity as a cultural species:

> From the very first stirrings of the human symbolic spirit, the technological and creative histories of humankind have revolved around an energetic exploration of the innovative potential released by our new way of processing information about the world. And if one thing is clear above all, it is that this exploration of our existing capacity is far from exhausted. Indeed, one might even argue that it has barely begun. So, while the auguries appear

4. According to some philosophers, we have reasons to preserve humanity from destruction for backward-looking reasons, either out of gratitude for the sacrifices of past people or because we have duties to make their sacrifices worthwhile (Kaczmarek and Beard 2020; Ord 2020, 49–50). The status of such considerations is controversial. Moreover, it seems to me that the intuition behind Unfinished Business does not depend on them. One might be quite skeptical (as I am) of appealing to such backward-looking considerations in the context of explaining extinction's badness while nevertheless finding the thought that humanity has unfinished business attractive. Consequently, I set aside the possibility that Unfinished Business reduces entirely to one of these existing types of view. If readers find backward-looking considerations compelling, then my proposal in what follows can be read as an attempt to locate *additional* reasons it is important to finish humanity's business.

> indeed to be for no significant biological change in our species, culturally, the future is infinite. (2012, 232)

As this quote suggests, exploration and development of human cultural capacities seems to have only just begun. Most of our species' roughly 300,000-year history has been spent in small bands of hunters and gatherers. The monumental changes associated with the Neolithic revolution are only 12,000 years old; advanced urban culture is only 5,000 years old; the scientific and industrial revolutions are only a couple hundred years old. Moreover, rates of cultural innovation and change were comparatively slow for most of our species' history and have only accelerated recently (Kelly 2019, 105). It cannot credibly be thought that humanity has exhausted its potential for cultural exploration and production, much less that it has reached some sort of cultural apogee or arrived at a point of stagnation and cultural senescence. Far from it. Taking a deep view of history, it seems we are just warming up. For perspective, it took our ancestors roughly one million years to transition from Oldowan to Acheulean stone technology, while in about 250 years we have gone from discovering that cells exist to decoding the human genome and inventing gene editing technology. Nobody knows, of course, where this grand experiment will lead, but it can hardly be argued that our capacities for cultural creation and exploration are exhausted.

Unfinished Business gives expression to the idea that, insofar as the trajectory of future change is positive, there is reason to hope that humanity is at the beginning of a long and fruitful arc of cultural development. We are, as Bennett puts it, on a great "biological and spiritual adventure" (1978, 66). The intuition is that this adventure is worth continuing. Though it could turn out badly, this is not something we know now. From our present vantage point, the adventure seems worth continuing.

2. Preservation Versus Development

It is key to this perspective that there be valuable forms of cultural *development*, not merely valuable cultural products to be continued and preserved. To appreciate the contrast, consider Samuel Scheffler's account of extinction's badness. According to Scheffler's attachment-based account, the object of our attachment is not merely a biological entity; it is a culturally and historically defined form of life (2013, 194; 2018, 33–34, 60; 2021, 706–708). Extinction would snuff out what people care about, and what people care about is a culturally defined object. In this sense, Scheffler's explanation of extinction's badness could be called a cultural explanation as well.

However, Scheffler's account puts the emphasis on continuation and preservation, not on development. It ascribes no value to positive cultural change *per se*. In fact, central elements of his account speak against too much change. This is because the account pivots on what people are attached to. There is, Scheffler suggests, a fundamentally conservative impulse inherent in valuing: we tend to care that the things we value be preserved into the future (2013, 22–23, 35, 60–61; 2018, 105–135). Part of why we care so much about humanity's future, according to Scheffler, is that it extends and preserves values we are acquainted with in our own lives. Thus, from the perspective of each generation, there may as well be indefinite cultural stasis.

To be fair, according to Scheffler individuals do participate in ongoing goal-directed transgenerational projects. Moreover, individuals may participate in progressive projects, like scientific inquiry or working for a more just world, and they may be animated by correspondingly progressive values. Yet the fact that it is important to complete goal-directed transgenerational projects is not itself central to Scheffler's explanation of the badness of extinction. Nor is the idea that some cultural endeavors are progressive. People can, after all, participate in different kinds of projects and be motivated by different kinds of values. The core explanation suggests that people are concerned to project their own values as far into the future as possible. This speaks

in favor of cultural preservation rather than development, with the caveat that people who happen to have progressive values will want to see *those* values realized in the future.

By contrast, Unfinished Business suggests that progressive cultural change matters more directly. Indeed, the core intuition is about positive cultural development: it matters, on this view, that important long-term cultural endeavors be brought to completion or that further progress be made in this direction. The value of positive cultural development is therefore anything but incidental to the view; it is definitive of it.

Older accounts of cultural progress have fallen out of favor, often for good reason. These accounts tended to assume that progress moves through discrete and identifiable developmental stages, that progress is more or less guaranteed in the long run thanks to providence or the working of immanent natural forces, and that Europe represents humanity's social and cultural vanguard.[5] An updated developmental perspective must jettison these assumptions, and it must distance itself in no uncertain terms from the morally pernicious baggage of cultural chauvinism and racism. Moreover, insofar as older accounts tend to be characterized by overly optimistic visions of progress, a realistic assessment needs to remain quite tempered. If the horrors of the 20th century have taught us anything, it is that giddy optimism is unwarranted.

A sober and cautious cultural progressivism remains credible all the same. Taking the long view of history, a range of development indexes suggest human life has been improving over time (Deaton 2013; Pinker 2018). Moreover, it is hard to deny that social and moral progress have indeed occurred (Buchanan and Powell 2018; Pinker 2012). There is little reason to expect this trend to suddenly halt and reverse. On the contrary, there is every reason to expect it to continue, as novel developments in science, technology, and medicine continue improving people's quality of life in myriad ways and levels of education and scientific literacy continue to rise globally. Given developments currently apace, it is not hard to envision realistic scenarios in which our descendants enjoy longer and healthier lives, higher levels of subjective well-being, greater intellectual, artistic, and moral powers, and live in societies more just than our own. This is not to say that the march of history will inevitably continue to trend positive; any gains that have been made are surely contingent and fragile. We can easily imagine dystopian futures (Bostrom 2013; Ord 2020). But developments to date warrant cautious optimism that progress will continue, at least for the foreseeable future.

With these caveats in place, I suggest older views of progress contain a kernel of truth that can be appropriated in attempting to sketch a developmental account of culture. Adam Ferguson contrasts the human animal with other animals as follows:

> In other classes of animals, the individual advances from infancy to old age or maturity; and he attains, in the compass of a single life, to all the perfection his nature can reach: but, in the human kind, the species has a progress as well as the individual; they build in every subsequent age on the foundations formerly laid. […] (1767/1996, 10)

Immanuel Kant articulates a similar developmentalist perspective on humanity's journey:

> In the human being (as the only rational creature on earth), those predispositions whose goal is the use of his reason were to develop completely only in the species, but not in the individual….nature perhaps needs an immense series of generations, each of which transmits its enlightenment to the next, in order finally to propel its germs in our species to that stage of development which is completely suited to its aim. (1784/2009, 11–12)

Ferguson and Kant link progressive historical change to the human capacity for culture. Later generations not only inherit and steward

5. See Bowler (2021) for a recent survey of these ideas.

what they have received; they build on it and pass it on to the next generation. This yields a model of human striving as fundamentally progressive. Generations are bound together, not as guardians of an unchanging cultural bequest, but as co-participants in a cultural drama that is (hopefully) headed somewhere exciting.

3. Moral Versus Nonmoral Goods

The course of cultural evolution has introduced a kind of contingent directionality to history in the following sense: it has launched humanity on a path-dependent trajectory that opens up possibilities while simultaneously introducing new challenges. Think of the revolutions anatomically modern humans have undergone since the dawn of the Holocene, including the Neolithic Revolution, the Urban Revolution, the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. These revolutions have fundamentally altered humanity's developmental trajectory. They have unleashed opportunities for social, cultural, and technological innovation, and they have significantly enhanced human potential. At the same time, they have introduced or scaled up a variety of evils (Hodder 2012; Renfrew 2008; Scott 2017). One way to think about humanity's business is as the task of trying to work out this uncertain civilizational adventure, harnessing the good while minimizing the bad.

However, it is worth distinguishing between moral and nonmoral goals at this juncture. A plausible moral goal would be to create a just global community. A plausible nonmoral goal would be to continue the scientific project as far as possible. Many worthy goals — realizing human freedom, creating conditions of perpetual peace, achieving sustainability — will contain a mix of moral and nonmoral elements, and will be supported by considerations of both kinds.

The pursuit of nonmoral goods arguably has explanatory priority in the present context. Precisely how to draw the contrast between "moral" and "nonmoral" depends on complex background assumptions in normative theory and on the particular context within which, and the purposes for which, the contrast is invoked. For present purposes, I have the following contrast in mind. Nonmoral goods are those that make individual and collective life worth living, goods like knowledge, friendship, beauty, and so on. Moral goods are those that ensure collective life meet basic standards of decency and justice, goods like fairness, equality, absence of exploitation, and so on.

Moral considerations in this (admittedly narrow) sense do not count in favor of perpetuating the human species. We ought to create just and fair institutions, but the reasons we have to create such institutions are not plausibly reasons to continue the human story. Instead, they are reasons to ensure that, *if* the human story continues, institutions will be just and fair. Similarly, evil and injustice perpetuated in our species' past give us reasons to memorialize and rectify past wrongs and to make collective amends. Yet contrary to what some philosophers have suggested (cf. Ord 2020, 51–52, 236), such reasons are not compelling *as* reasons to perpetuate the human species.

A convincing answer to the question of whether and why we should keep the human story going needs to appeal, in the first instance, to those ends that make individual and collective life worth living, that is, to nonmoral considerations. While ensuring that everyone has enough to eat may be more important than putting another probe into space, ensuring that people do not go hungry is not a reason to keep the human story going, whereas finding out whether there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe might be such a reason. In this sense, nonmoral reasons are more explanatorily basic than moral reasons in the present context. The latter may be more urgent, but they only "kick in" on the assumption that the human story is worth continuing, a question that must be decided on other grounds. Consequently, while humanity's business includes both moral and nonmoral tasks, it is the nonmoral ones that explain why we should keep the human story going, if indeed we should.

It is difficult to say what humanity's important nonmoral goals should be. For present purposes, it suffices to adumbrate one general type of value and give a specific instance of it that can be used to illustrate the view under consideration. One of the core characteristics of our species, as noted above, is our capacity for cumulative cultural

learning. This capacity makes learning over deep time possible. We can collectively explore new possibilities and discover new truths over time. Now it is plausible that among humanity's central nonmoral aims ought to be such exploration and learning. The specific example I will focus on is the scientific enterprise. Science is an astonishing cross-generational cultural endeavor. It is rather remarkable that human beings, who individually have quite dim capacities for comprehending the inner workings of nature, have developed a way to collectively make progress in unlocking nature's secrets over time. Science is surely one of humanity's greatest collective achievements, and it is a good example of the kind of endeavor one might plausibly suppose realizes nonmoral values of the kind that contribute to explaining why we have reasons to want the human story to continue.[6]

4. Perpetuation-Value Versus Progress-Value

Although there is an extensive literature on collective action, collective achievements remain largely unexplored.[7] This is unfortunate, given that most of humanity's great accomplishments have been, and will continue to be, collective in nature. Such accomplishments come about through massively distributed collective endeavors, smeared out across persons and times, and they are made possible by significant collaboration and division of labor, not all of it individually impressive. Science is a good example. While we rightly admire and applaud the accomplishments of individual scientists, in a wider perspective, these accomplishments are products of vast intertemporally extended collective activity. They depend not only on scientists' immediate collaborators, but on intellectual networks and institutional infrastructure extending outward in space and backward in time, and on broader conditions of social support involving the cooperative division of labor.

One way to think about the personal significance of involvement in such collective cultural endeavors is that individuals win a share in collective achievements through appropriate participation. Consider a relay race. Runners on each team hand off the baton in succession to other runners on the same team, yet while only one runner from each team crosses the finish line, it is not individual runners but entire teams that win or lose races. More generally, collective achievements are often such that while only some members of the larger collective reach the goal or perform some action, all participating members win a share in the achievement: one person scores the winning goal, sets foot on the moon, signs a bill into law — many share the achievement.

This principle need not be limited to cooperation among contemporaries. There is no reason why collective achievement cannot be spread out over time, including beyond the lifetimes of individual participants. Imagine a relay race, now tweaked to greatly extend the time dimension. Suppose the race includes vast numbers of runners and lasts several lifetimes (it's an epic race!). Runners earlier in the race are just as vital to the ultimate outcome as later runners. It does not matter where in space or time they are located; they play their part and contribute to the team reaching its goal. When a team wins, it is the entire team that inherits the success, though not all of its members are

6. Some readers may be wary of the collectivizing locution "humanity's business." As one anonymous reviewer helpfully asks: *Whose* business is unfinished? For example, historically, science has only been the preserve of certain privileged classes from a limited range of cultures, and sometimes it has been pursued at the expense of other people's legitimate and valuable cultural projects. In general, not all worthwhile cultural projects are shared, and sometimes valuable projects can conflict. I can only briefly address these worries here. First, my use of the locution "humanity's business" is not meant to deny or gloss over such complexities. As I use it, the locution is a convenient placeholder for something like "all human business of the right kind, whatever that may be". I focus on science because it compellingly illustrates the kind of value at issue, not because it is the only valuable cultural project of the right kind. Second, a project need not be universally shared for its lack of completion to contribute to extinction's badness. Third, some projects, like science, do have very wide appeal and may be, at least in aspiration, available to all. Fourth, the problem of conflict seems genuine, though somewhat orthogonal to my argument. What is to be done if two legitimate valuable projects conflict is a further and important question, a question of justice. However, one does not need to know how to answer this question to agree that there can be projects of the relevant kind, grounding distinctive reasons to avoid extinction. It is this latter idea I am attempting to unpack and render compelling.

7. Philosophers have mainly focused on the nature of *individual* achievements and their role in the good life (see Bradford and Keller 2015 for an overview).

around to celebrate the success. More generally, though earlier participants in intergenerational telic projects will not be able to know about future successes, they can nevertheless appreciate the significance of their own participation as (potential) co-producers and co-achievers of the ultimate outcome.

Yet it would be a mistake to overemphasize the idea of personal contribution to collective achievement in this context. One might not, for whatever reason, be able to contribute to the collective enterprise, yet still believe that it would be a good thing for the enterprise to be continued and its aim achieved. A dominant focus on personal contribution would also be strangely narcissistic when contemplating humanity's future achievements, as if what ought to matter most to us is that our contribution (our drop in the ocean!) makes a difference. We can simply find such achievements important as such, regardless of whether and how much we contribute to them.

It is important to distinguish between different kinds of value future cultural achievements may have. Unfinished Business is not the view that it would be good for there to be more individual and collective accomplishments in the future. It is instead the view that important collective endeavors that are already "up and running" should be pursued further, and, if possible, be completed or brought closer to completion. (New projects may, of course, be added to the agenda as time goes on.)

Some intergenerational projects have a telic structure. The project of science is like this. It has a clearly definable goal — the systematic comprehension of nature — relative to which progress can be made. We do not know how far we can go in making progress toward this goal. Perhaps there are inherent limits to the comprehensibility of nature or perhaps there are cognitive constraints on what finite minds like ours can grasp. Still, it is a clear goal, and one we can progress toward.

Not all cultural endeavors have this kind of structure. For example, it does not seem that the production of art has any clearly definable goal, nor — though some may object to this characterization — that art is aesthetically progressive. (Upon visiting the Lascaux cave, Picasso reportedly said, "We have learned nothing in twelve thousand years.") Of course, even granting that art lacks inherent telic structure, one might think that it can facilitate some non-artistic process that *is* telic. For example, perhaps art is a mode of cultural exploration that contributes over time to greater understanding of human nature and human individuality, or to greater freedom, or to a more humane and excellent social world, and so on. But with this caveat, it is fair to say that art itself is nontelic. At any rate, I shall assume this here for purposes of illustration.

If art has no clear goal relative to which progress can be made, there is no question of whether it is the kind of cultural project it would be valuable to complete or make progress toward completing. The question simply does not arise. We can sensibly ask whether it would be valuable to continue this cultural enterprise, but not whether it would be valuable to complete it. By contrast, science is a cultural project with a telic structure. We can therefore sensibly ask whether it would be valuable to complete, or make progress toward completing, this project. The distinction here is between *perpetuation-value* and *progress-value*.

At the heart of many explanations of extinction's badness is an appeal to perpetuation-value. As we have seen, core components of Scheffler's view speak in favor of preserving valuable elements of culture that we are acquainted with. Similarly, views that appeal to possible future well-being refer to a value that can be perpetuated without limit. At the heart of Unfinished Business, I submit, is an appeal to progress-value: all else equal, it is or can be valuable to complete, or make progress toward completing, certain kinds of goal-directed projects. Science is plausibly a project of this kind. It would be a great and wonderful thing to possess systematic comprehension of nature, and it would be an awesome achievement to reach, or to make more headway in reaching, this goal.

It is crucial to this perspective that the endeavor is structured by a goal whose completion can itself be valuable. There is no reason

to complete a valueless project, and progress has value only vis-*à-vis* genuinely valuable goals. One might think that a climber has reason to complete a climb just because it would finish the activity she is engaged in. But this is misleading. Insofar as there is value in completing the climb, it is because doing so would be valuable on independent grounds (e.g., because it would be a valuable accomplishment or a meaningful experience). Similarly, whatever climb humanity has embarked on, the mere fact that continuation brings us closer to completion is no reason to continue; there must be independent value in doing so.

5. Welfare-Promotion Versus Meaningfulness

At the end of *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit considers what would be lost if humanity were intentionally destroyed. While Classical Utilitarians would say that the "badness of this crime would lie in the vast reduction of the possible sum of happiness", others would say that

> [...] what matters are what Sidgwick called the 'ideal goods' — the Sciences, the Arts, and moral progress, or the continued advance towards a wholly just world-wide community. The destruction of mankind would prevent further achievements of these three kinds. This would be extremely bad because what matters most would be the highest achievements of these kinds, and these highest achievements would come in future generations. (Parfit 1984, 454)

This contrast between happiness and ideal goods raises the important question of which has explanatory priority in the present context. In practice, it may be difficult to disentangle the value of future cultural developments from the value of future well-being. Might one or the other nevertheless enjoy explanatory priority? Pondering the values at stake in humanity's future, Toby Ord writes:

> Our descendants would ... likely be able to develop and enhance existing human capacities — empathy, intelligence, memory, concentration, imagination. Such enhancements could make possible entirely new forms of human culture and cognition: new games, dances, stories; new integrations of thought and emotion; new forms of art. And we would have millions of years — maybe billions, or trillions — to go much further, to explore the most distant reaches of what can be known, felt, created and understood. ... Yet how strange it would be if this single species of ape, equipped by evolution with this limited set of sensory and cognitive capacities, after only a few thousand years of civilization, ended up anywhere near the maximum possible quality of life. Much more likely, I think, that we have barely begun the ascent. (2020, 238)

Ord's comments suggest two ideas: that if humanity sticks around, there will be opportunity for valuable forms of cultural exploration *and* that people will tend to be much better off. Are these values equally basic? Or is one more normatively fundamental than the other in explaining why it would be good for humanity to stick around? Ord does not address these questions. However, as the second passage shows, it is possible to cash out the value of cultural exploration and development in terms of added welfare, the importance of an historical "ascent" being that it produces improvements in "quality of life".

The suggestion that the value of future cultural development reduces to the value of welfare is natural and, frankly, attractive. But there is a plausible alternative. The intuition that extinction would be bad because humanity could not finish important business is, I submit, driven by considerations of meaningfulness. Insofar as the idea of Unfinished Business appeals to us, we find that humanity going on to do and achieve various valuable things in the future matters, not because it is a vehicle of welfare promotion, much less of welfare maximization,

but because this prospect would be meaningful. Let us briefly explore this line of thought.

We can begin by noting that meaningfulness is not identical with welfare at the level of individual lives. Susan Wolf (1997, 2010) has argued persuasively that meaning in life is identical neither with morality nor with happiness, though she claims it is in a person's enlightened self-interest to live a meaningful life. Yet it would clearly be a mistake to conflate meaningfulness with the whole of welfare. As Wolf puts it, "A meaningful life is better than a meaningless one, but once it is meaningful enough, there may be no self-interested reason to want, as it were, to squeeze more meaning into it" (1997, 224). It seems implausible, for example, that parents should want a maximally meaningful life for their child rather than one that is sufficiently meaningful. This is because, even if meaning is part of the child's good, it is only *part* of that good, and it would not be in the child's interest to sacrifice all other parts of her good for what is meaningful. Similarly, it seems implausible that meaningful choice could never be imprudent choice — that meaningful choice is, *ipso facto*, in an individual's self-interest. This can only be the case if meaningfulness is not identical with a person's good, though it may be an element of it.[8]

Moving to the collective level, it is worth distinguishing two ways in which humanity's future might be meaningful. Suppose all cultural progress grinds to a halt. Due to various physical constraints, one million years from now humanity reaches a point of cultural senescence where no further significant cultural developments are feasible. People's lives might still be rich with meaning in the sense of being oriented around projects of genuine worth. They might enjoy friendship, contemplating the quantum world, and making art. The human future from that point forward might be very meaningful in the sense that it would contain many individually meaningful lives, but it would not be very meaningful in another obvious sense: there would be no more interesting and progressive cultural change. In the first sense, meaningful futures are closely connected to individual welfare; in the second, the connection is more remote.

To see the latter point, consider that meaningful futures (in the second sense), are conceptually and normatively distinct from futures high in welfare. Suppose we stipulate that welfare levels are held constant, so that progress in science does not make future people better off. Would scientific progress nevertheless be meaningful? To me, the obvious answer is "yes". The prospect that future persons will achieve a unified theory of all physical forces or find out how ubiquitous intelligent life is in the cosmos seems meaningful. I don't need to know anything about how well off these future persons will be to make this judgment. My verdict about meaningfulness is independent of my verdict about welfare.

Next, consider the plausibility of rational tradeoffs between futures containing more welfare and futures higher in meaning (in the second sense). Suppose that humanity could (a) persist for a longer time at low levels of cultural efflorescence or (b) persist for a shorter time but reach its full cultural potential, with average welfare held constant and more welfare summed over time in the first scenario. This looks like a choice between (a) a future that contains more well-being in aggregate and (b) a future that is more meaningful. Similarly, suppose the choice is between (a) a shorter future in which humanity makes less progress in important telic projects, though with a far larger global population, and (b) a longer future in which humanity makes more progress in important telic projects, though with a much smaller global population, with average welfare held constant and more welfare summed over time in the first scenario. It seems natural to think of this as a choice between (a) a prospect that would contain more aggregate welfare and (b) one that would be more meaningful.

That we can imagine more meaningful futures while holding average welfare levels fixed, as well as more meaningful futures containing less aggregate well-being, suggests that considerations about the meaningfulness of future trajectories do not conceptually map on to considerations about total or average welfare in any straightforward

8. The precise interconnections between meaning and well-being will, naturally, depend on specific accounts of each. For an overview, see Kauppinen (2015).

way. Moreover, if there can be rational trade-offs between more meaningful futures and futures containing more welfare, this suggests meaningful futures can be choiceworthy in their own right, i.e., not merely as a disguised way of talking about the reasons there are to promote well-being.

In sum, we can distinguish two senses in which the future might be meaningful. In the first, a more meaningful future is, all else equal, also a future higher in average or total welfare. This is so because, though meaning in individual lives is not the same as well-being, it plausibly makes a contribution to well-being. In the second sense, a more meaningful future is not necessarily a future higher in average or total welfare. This is so because, though there may be significant empirical correlations between the two kinds of future, they embody distinct good-making features, features that, however regularly they may tend to co-occur, can be conceptually and normatively prised apart. If all this is correct, then, even if part of what is meaningful about scientific progress is that it promotes welfare, this need not be the whole story. Many of us find progress in science meaningful because it is a cultural enterprise structured around the pursuit of an intrinsic good: understanding nature. Its meaningfulness need not bottom out in the fact that it improves total or average well-being.

6. Could It Matter?

The line of reasoning I have sketched raises a natural worry. Suppose we could create a human chain of lights that spreads from person to person across space in such a way that the emergent pattern would be aesthetically pleasing to an observer capable of witnessing the pattern from space, but that no observer will ever witness the pattern and that there is no further value for any of the participants in this exercise. We should agree that this exercise is pointless. There is no obvious value in the emergent pattern and certainly no reason whatsoever for human beings to attempt to instantiate it. Something similar presumably goes for the emergent pattern of cultural production over time. No matter how awesome it is, the pattern has no value as such, independent of those beings for whom cultural exploration and creation is valuable, and there is no reason to try to instantiate the pattern for its own sake. The interpretation I have offered of Unfinished Business may seem to come precariously close to recommending we instantiate such a pattern of lights. If the value of future cultural production does not reduce to the value of welfare, then what would be the point of pursuing it?

I have some sympathy for this worry. Nevertheless, the interpretation I have offered seems both coherent and *prima facie* plausible. Insisting that future cultural activity that does not realize welfare is pointless is not dialectically persuasive; it merely expresses the welfarist commitments that the interpretation I have given of Unfinished Business is designed to reject. As I have attempted to show, appealing to meaningfulness offers a distinct normative perspective, and it has some independent motivation. It offers a plausible alternative (or complement) to purely welfarist normative commitments. The relevant cultural processes, I have tried to show, are *not* like a pointless chain of lights: they are long-term cultural endeavors organized around genuine values; they are sites of collective achievement; they are vehicles of individual meaning-conferring participation; and they are intelligible objects of human identification and pro-attitudes.

It seems plausible, then, that the processes I have described could be valuable in a way that implies reasons for attitudes and actions. Compare two alternatives. The first involves great cultural achievement and is highly meaningful. The second involves much less cultural achievement and is less meaningful. Focusing only on these facts, it seems appropriate to hope that the first alternative is realized and to be disappointed if it is not. Moreover, unless we are antecedently welfarists, it is surely also plausible to suppose that we have pro tanto reasons to choose the first option. Above, I suggested that considerations of meaningfulness may sometimes conflict with considerations of welfare. If so, then although choosing the meaningful option may sometimes violate prudence (when choosing in one's own case) or pure benevolence (when choosing in cases involving other people), there may nevertheless be at least some reason to do so. To say this

is not to say how much weight such considerations have. Even if they were almost always outweighed by considerations of welfare, it does not follow that they have no independent weight.

In short, the value at issue in Unfinished Business, as I have interpreted it, is plausibly reason-implying. It need not be like the normatively inert aesthetic value of unobserved patterns of light — beautiful, perhaps, but of no interest to anyone.

7. Impersonal Value

Notice two things about the collective processes I have described. First, there is no need to assume that humanity, considered as a collective entity, is a morally considerable subject in its own right; nor is there any need to assume that humanity is an irreducible bearer of value over and above individual human beings. Return to the example of the relay race. It is perfectly coherent for a team member to want her team to win the race without attributing to her commitment to an entity, The Team, that has independent moral status or value over and above the members. Second, the processes do not float free from ordinary human concerns and endeavors. On some views, humans seem to be caught up in a cosmic drama whose value is, to a greater or lesser extent, independent of them. For example, on Hegel's view, the grand purpose of history is Spirit becoming conscious of itself. More recently, Tim Mulgan (2015) has argued that there is cosmic purpose, though humans are irrelevant to it. These views posit processes that are likely to be deeply alienating to ordinary humans. Unfinished Business is different. It does not appeal to supra-human entities or cosmic purposes transcending the human quest. Instead, it appeals to ordinary facts about what our species is like, how in virtue of such facts there can be cumulative cultural change over time, how some such changes can be progressive, and how there can be value to continuing these progressive processes. Such facts are accessible to ordinary human imagination, identification, and motivation.

The view I have sketched is nevertheless impersonal in the following sense. Though valuable telic cultural processes are available for appreciative engagement by individual agents and can confer meaning on individual lives when they are appropriately related to these, the object of approval or choice is nonetheless a state of affairs involving somewhat abstract processes that are multiply realizable by distinct human beings and do not depend on being found meaningful by any particular person. For example, if we judge that it would be meaningful for humanity to make further progress in science, what this judgment comes to (in the individualist terms I have suggested) is that some future human beings carry the baton forward and go further in the quest to understand nature. This does not depend on particular people carrying the baton or on any given individual finding her participation in the process meaningful.[9]

8. A Distinctive Explanation of Extinction's Badness

As noted in the introduction, one reason Unfinished Business is interesting is that it offers a way of thinking about the badness of human extinction that avoids appealing to a key assumption in Opportunity Cost: the idea that adding more valuable lives to the world makes the world impartially better. Yet even if we accept Opportunity Cost, Unfinished Business plausibly adds an interesting layer of normative explanation.

Opportunity Cost is ultimately an ahistorical explanation of extinction's badness. It is ahistorical in the sense that history only matters contingently, not in any deep way. Opportunity Cost enjoins us to prefer a universe teeming for a short while with good lives over a universe with fewer good lives spread out over longer stretches of time. Indeed, as long as the math works out right, it enjoins us to prefer a

9. It is plausible that meaning in individual lives requires not only genuinely worthwhile activity but appropriate subjective investment in such activity (Wolf 2010). Might something similar hold for meaningful collective processes? Perhaps. But even if there is such an analog, presumably not all participants in the process need find it meaningful, only sufficiently many. Just as subjective investment within a life is compatible with moments of non-investment (boredom, ennui, apathy, doubt), presumably what would be required for certain kinds of meaningful collective processes is that sufficiently many individuals find them meaningful.

single-generation universe over a trillion-generation universe. In this way, Opportunity Cost treats the axes of time and space as symmetrical. The only reason to favor the perpetuation of life over greater spans of time is that this will (contingently) be the way value is maximized. Moreover, the value appealed to by Opportunity Cost is unbounded. While the laws of nature place constraints on what can be feasibly realized, there is, axiologically speaking, no limit to the increase of the value: the value can be increased indefinitely. By contrast, Unfinished Business is essentially historical, and it appeals to a bounded value. It does not imply that it would be good for there to be more meaningful achievements in the history of the universe. Instead, it implies that it would be meaningful to make headway and perhaps to complete valuable cultural projects with telic structure. Such projects are historical, and they realize a kind of value that is, by its very nature, bounded.

In this regard, Unfinished Business contrasts not only with Opportunity Cost but with a wider family of views that are historically shapeless. As we saw earlier, Scheffler's view ascribes no intrinsic importance to cultural development. The view is not fundamentally about going anywhere but about preserving something. For all the differences between Scheffler's view and Opportunity Cost, both center on values that can be perpetuated indefinitely. There is no natural terminus to the promotion of welfare or valuable forms of culture. All else equal, these can be perpetuated without end. By contrast, Unfinished Business centers on what I called progress-value, a kind of value that, by its nature, implies a terminal point. Accepting progress-value adds evaluative structure; it gives shape to history.

In virtue of the kind of value it appeals to, Unfinished Business allows significant contingency to enter explanations of extinction's badness. If humans had never taken on telic projects, then the reasons at issue in Unfinished Business would not have applied. The reasons at issue in Unfinished Business become relevant only once humanity gets caught up in a developmental trajectory that introduces some cultural-historical projects susceptible of further development and relative to which more or less satisfactory resolution becomes possible. If humanity had never taken on telic projects (e.g., by failing to embark on its civilizational adventure), or if it someday reached a stable equilibrium point at which there were no further valuable goal-directed collective tasks requiring completion, then there would be nothing valuable requiring completion and consequently no disvalue in extinction.[10]

That, one might think, is a very implausible result. Shapeless views do not share this defect. They can explain what would have been bad about humanity's extinction if we had never taken on telic projects, and they can explain what would be bad about human extinction in some hypothetical future in which humanity has finished its important business. Yet if there can be multiple reasons of different kinds that contribute to explaining extinction's badness, then, of course, this limitation in scope is not so implausible. We should frankly acknowledge the limits of Unfinished Business as an explanation of extinction's badness. But if we are evaluating the view as a contribution to a total explanation rather than as itself a total explanation, the interesting question is not whether it explains everything, but whether it explains anything. It does seem plausible that Unfinished Business succeeds in highlighting a distinctive bad-making feature, even if it

10. Here and earlier in the essay, I use the phrase "civilizational adventure". To avoid confusion, let me emphasize that I am not implying either of the following two claims. First, I am not implying that there was no interesting historical or cultural change before these transformations in human history, a claim that seems clearly false given what we know about cultural evolution (Henrich 2016). Second, I am not implying that traditional hunter-gatherer lifeways, whether in our ancestral past or in the contemporary world, are any less valuable than patterns of life in more technologically and scientifically advanced societies. We have reason to be suspicious of such self-congratulating assessments. From the very origins of civilization, the "civilized" have been telling themselves stories about the superiority of their way of life, not least to justify evils they have been willing to inflict on the "uncivilized" (Scott 2017). Thus, it is consistent with my argument that humans had telic projects prior to the emergence of civilization, and that the advent of civilization represents, in significant respects, a worsening of the human condition. For all that, it seems to me nevertheless plausible that (1) humanity's civilizational adventure brought novel telic projects into existence, and that (2) these projects can generate new (pro tanto) reasons to avoid extinction.

doesn't explain everything that would be bad about extinction under all conditions. Unfinished Business plausibly adds a layer of normative explanation to shapeless views because it captures additional and distinctive kinds of value at stake in human survival and vindicates the intuition that something about the historical drama might itself be ethically significant.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to make sense of Unfinished Business as a distinctive and interesting view about the badness of human extinction. On the interpretation I proposed, the intuition driving Unfinished Business is closely linked to concerns about a collectively meaningful future. This suggestion raises difficult questions I have not attempted to address. Does it really make sense to extend the concept of meaningfulness beyond individual lives (its usual domain of application in contemporary ethics) to collective human endeavors? And if the meaningfulness of a future trajectory does not reduce to its total or average welfare, then how should tradeoffs be made between these apparently distinct dimensions of value?

A key upshot of the interpretation I have proposed is that the topic of meaningfulness as applied to humanity and its future deserves further investigation. As an empirical matter, it would be worth finding out how widespread concerns about the meaningfulness of collective future trajectories really are. And as a normative matter, it would be worth clarifying what, if any, significance such concerns can plausibly have.

Setting my particular proposal aside, if the broader interpretive project of making sense of Unfinished Business can be made to succeed, then the thought with which we began is not as odd as it may initially seem. In addition to all the other thoughts that might come rushing into our minds when contemplating an imminent end to human history, we might also, and not unreasonably, have the thought: "Oh no! Surely it isn't over yet! That can't be the end of the story!" Such a reaction to the thought of extinction can make sense, I submit, even in a world devoid of any natural telos.[11]

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