Unfinished Business

Jonathan Knutzen
NYU Center for Bioethics

Forthcoming in Philosophers’ Imprint

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 very 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 what chimpanzees and bonobos will be like in 200 years is far less interesting (and frankly less scary) than the question 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, are of very recent vintage: the beginning of the abolition of legally entrenched social and political hierarchies is barely 200 years

---

1 Adams (1989: 472-473); Bell (1993: 31-32); Bennett (1978: 66-68); Bostrom (2013: 23); Kavka (1978: 196-197); Ord (2020: 89-91); Slaughter (1994: 1078), Tonn (2009: 431). Beyond these suggestive remarks there is nothing like a full-blown proposal of this type of view in the literature.

2 For excellent overviews of the modern scientific attempt to understand these changes, see Fuentes (2017), Renfrew (2008), and Tattersal (2012).
old; the great discoveries of relativity and quantum mechanics are barely 100 years old; the internet is a couple of decades old; the decoding of the human genome is roughly 20 years old.

Contemplating such facts, one's reaction to the thought of immanent extinction might not in the first instance be, “Oh no! All that loss of future 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 (1978) articulates his reaction to the thought of human extinction along the latter lines. “My attitude to mankind's future,” he writes, “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 (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 history of our species would be 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 shall not be primarily concerned to defend the view against objections or to compare it with the merits of 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 explored in detail, I shall be content if my discussion contributes to clarifying what
this neglected option might plausibly look like and what it contributes to our ethical thinking about humanity’s future.

One reason *Unfinished Business* is interesting is that it offers a potential alternative to one of the dominant paradigms for explaining extinction’s badness. According to that paradigm, extinction any time soon would come at a massive opportunity cost in terms of feasibly achievable welfare over the lifetime of our species or our species’ descendants (Bostrom 2003; Ord 2020: 79-84; Parfit 1984: 453-4). 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’ll 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 at least pro tanto reason to realize those lives. Not everyone accepts these assumptions. Many 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 many 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” (67), believing that it would be good for humanity to continue and bad for it to go extinct. If *Unfinished Business* can be developed in a way that is plausible, it may offer a way of accepting axiological neutrality without being laissez-faire about extinction. While Bennett rejects the idea that the utilities of possible people give us a reason to create those people, he nevertheless suggests that humanity’s great
“biological and spiritual adventure” seems worth continuing (66) and alludes to the possibility of a prima facie duty to finish “important business” (67). Bennett ultimately takes his stand to be unprincipled and a matter of personal preference (68-69); hence, he does not himself see his claims as providing any kind of practical or attitudinal justification for his stance. But it is worth examining ideas in the vicinity of *Unfinished Business* to see if they reveal normative reasons that plausibly do contribute to such justification. While 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 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 is at least pro tanto reason to do so (cf. McMahan 2013; Parfit 2017). Consequently, I tend to think *Opportunity Cost* provides at least a partial explanation of extinction’s badness. But this, obviously enough, doesn’t mean it provides a total explanation. It seems plausible that there are a variety of reasons why extinction might be bad (some of these are canvassed in Bostrom 2013 and Ord 2020). On a pluralist picture according to which there are a variety of values and normative principles bearing on the issue, reasons might be complementary rather than rival. In short, 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 captures its intuitive appeal, is consistent with plausible constraints, and makes it non-redundant to other views in the literature (i.e., to show that 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. The next section begins with a brief adumbration of the view; subsequent sections then 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, Richerson, and Henrich 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 (2012) 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.

---

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 & Beard 2020; Ord 2020: 91-92). However, the status of such considerations is controversial. Moreover, the intuition behind Unfinished Business does not, it seems to me, 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 such 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, one might even argue that it has barely begun. So, while the auguries appear indeed to be for no significant biological change in our species, culturally, the future is infinite. (493-494)

As suggested by Tattersal, 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 about one million years to transition from Oldowan to Acheulean stone technology, while in roughly 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.

The perspective to which Unfinished Business gives expression is 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” (Bennett 1978: 66). The intuition is that this adventure is worth continuing. Though it could, of course, 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, but above all a form of life defined culturally and historically (2013: 194; 2018: 33-34, 60; 2021: 9-10). 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 not only ascribes no value to positive cultural change per se, 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; 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. So far as central ingredients in Scheffler’s attachment-based model would suggest, then, 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 and 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 agents 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, of course, fallen out of favor, and often for very good reasons. 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 (for an excellent recent survey of these ideas, see Bowler 2021, especially, pp. 1-172). 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 historical 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 will 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 does not mean, of course, that the march of history must inevitably continue to trend positive; any gains that have been made are surely contingent and highly fragile. We can easily imagine dystopian futures (Bostrom 2013, Ord 2020). But developments to date warrant at least 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 insight that can be appropriated in attempting to sketch a developmental account of culture. The Scottish historian 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 through time:

“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 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 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 (along with early state building), the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. These revolutions have fundamentally altered humanity’s developmental trajectory, unleashing extraordinary opportunities for social, cultural, and technological innovation, and massively enhancing human potential. At the same time, they 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 moral and nonmoral goals at this juncture. For example, 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 be supported by considerations of both kinds.

Yet 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 don’t count in favor of perpetuating the human species. We ought to create just and fair institutions, yet 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: 88–89, 399), such reasons are not compelling as reasons to perpetuate the human species.

A convincing answer to the question of whether and why we ought to keep the human story going needs to appeal, in the first instance, to those ends that make individual and collective life worth living, i.e., to nonmoral considerations. While ensuring that everyone has enough to eat may be more important than putting another probe into space, ensuring that people don’t 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, in some sense, more urgent, but they arguably 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 to 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 possible learning over deep time. 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 shall focus on is the scientific enterprise. Science is an astonishing cross-generational cultural endeavor. It is rather remarkable that individually finite and fallible human beings with very dim capacities for comprehending the inner workings of nature have developed sophisticated traditions of inquiry, along with technology and institutional infrastructure, to collectively amp up and refine their inquiry over time and make genuine progress in unlocking nature’s secrets. 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.4

---

4 Some readers may be wary of the collectivizing locution, “humanity’s business.” As one reviewer from Philosophers’ Imprint 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 cover 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 is.” 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 that 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.
Although there is a sizable literature on collective action, the nature and value of collective achievements have been left largely unexplored. This is unfortunate, especially since 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 made possible by significant collaboration and division of labor, not all of which need be individually impressive. Science is a good example. While we rightly admire and applaud the accomplishments of an individual scientist, in a wider perspective these accomplishments are products of vast intertemporally extended collective activity. They depend not only on the scientist’s 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 of the personal significance of involvement in such collective cultural endeavors is that individuals win a share in the collective achievement 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.

---

5 Philosophers have focused mainly on the nature of individual achievements and their role in the good life. See Bradford and Keller (2015) for an overview.
This principle need not be limited to cooperation among contemporaries. There seems 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 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 appropriately ought to matter to me is that MY contribution (MY 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.

Now it is important to distinguish different kinds of value future cultural achievements may have. As I am envisioning *Unfinished Business*, it is not the view that it would be good that there be more individual and collective accomplishments in the future; it is instead the view that important collective endeavors that are “up and running” 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 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 don't know how far humans 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's a clear goal and one we can make 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 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.

Since 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 doesn’t 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, since science is a cultural project with a telic structure, we can 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 cultural formations with which we are acquainted. 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 reasons to complete a climb just because it would count as a completion of the activity she is engaged in. But that 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 constitute 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 vs. 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 “[t]he 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. (1984: 454)

The contrast drawn by Parfit (and Sidgwick) between happiness and ideal goods raises the important question of which of these has explanatory priority. In practice, of course, it may be difficult to disentangle the value of cultural development from the value of well-being. 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: 401, 402)

These passages suggest 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. How do these values relate? Are they equally basic? Or is one more normatively fundamental than the other? Ord doesn’t 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 welfare promotion (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, fundamentally driven by considerations of meaningfulness: insofar as the intuition of Unfinished Business appeals to us, we find that humanity’s going on to do and achieve various valuable things in the future, and in particular of making further progress in its valuable telic projects, matters, not because it is a vehicle of welfare promotion, much less of welfare maximization, but because this prospect would be meaningful. Let’s briefly explore this line of thought.

We can begin by noticing that, at the level of individual lives, meaningfulness is not identical with welfare. 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, as opposed to one that is sufficiently meaningful. This is because, even if meaning is a 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

---

6 Since his book is written in an ecumenical spirit and for a wide audience, Ord wisely avoids taking a stand on such philosophically contentious issues. He speaks throughout his book of humanity’s potential and humanity’s flourishing, expressions that could refer to cultural flowering or to aggregate individual well-being or (as seems likely) to both. These formulations leave open questions about basic axiology and normative priority. In an ecumenical spirit, Ord canvasses a range of reasons one might want humanity to have a long future (66-101) and he seems genuinely moved by most of these. Nevertheless, some of Ord’s comments fit well with the view that the fundamental explanation of extinction’s badness has to do with maximizing the (possible) value of future life, and hence, with a basically welfare-promotion perspective (45, 70-84, 88, 397).
all other parts of her good for the sake of what is meaningful. Similarly, it is implausible to think that meaningful choice could never be imprudent choice—that meaningful choice is, ipso facto, in an individual's self-interest. This can only be if meaningfulness is not identical with a person's good, though it may be an element of it.

Moving on to consider collective achievements over time, meaningfulness and (aggregate) welfare seem distinct at this level as well. Take the meaningfulness of progress in science. That future persons will be made better off need not be all that is meaningful about such progress. Suppose we stipulate that welfare levels are held fixed, so that progress in science does not make future people better off. Would scientific progress be nevertheless meaningful? To me, the obvious answer seems ‘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. In this sense, my verdict about meaningfulness is independent of my verdict about welfare.

To further accentuate the independence of these two kinds of judgment, consider the residual value of welfare if cultural progress were to disappear as a source of meaning. Suppose 500 years from now humanity achieves a completed science. The quest for scientific understanding could no longer be a source of meaning for people living after that point. We can even imagine a case in which all cultural progress grinds to a halt: due to various physical constraints, one million years from now humanity reaches a point of cultural senescence and no further significant cultural developments are feasible. People’s lives might still be very good. Indeed, they might be rich with meaning. But these people would no longer derive meaning from progressive cultural activity. They might enjoy contemplating the quantum world and making art, but they wouldn’t get meaning from participating

---

7 The relationship between meaning and well-being is complex, and the precise interconnections between the two will depend on specific accounts of each (for an overview, see Kauppinen 2015). Yet the general point stands that meaning is not strictly identical with well-being.
in progressive cultural endeavors and they wouldn’t cherish any hopes that there will be further developments in these endeavors in humanity’s future.

Next, consider the plausibility of tradeoffs between welfare and meaning. Suppose at some point further gains in scientific achievement come at a cost in welfare. Perhaps, for example, future humans must decide whether to accept a small reduction in welfare to pursue deeper understanding of black holes. Suppose they choose deeper understanding of black holes because, they say, this prospect seems meaningful. We might deem their choice imprudent, but we are unlikely to think it unintelligible.

Consider a further trade-off. Suppose humanity could persist for a very long time at low levels of cultural efflorescence but high levels of individual welfare, or that it could persist somewhat less long but reaching its full cultural potential. This choice may not be entirely hypothetical. Put in terms of a trade-off in existential risk, the choice might be between a safer option that maximizes expected welfare over the long haul and an option of energetic cultural exploration that seems more meaningful but is also associated with higher risks.

Or consider this. Suppose the choice is between a longer future in which human beings make more progress in important telic projects like science but with a smaller population, and a shorter future in which human beings make less progress but with a larger population. It seems natural to model this as a choice between a prospect that would be more meaningful and one that would contain more welfare.

Since judgments about welfare and meaningfulness seem to be judgments of different kinds, and since considerations of welfare and meaningfulness can sometimes conflict, it is plausible that meaningfulness does not reduce to welfare, either in individual lives or in humanity’s future. If that is right, then although part of what is meaningful about scientific progress is that it tends to make people better off, 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. The
enterprise can add meaning to our own lives, insofar as we contribute to it, but we can also find it meaningful that the enterprise be carried on and further progress be made in it whether or not we contribute to it. These facts about meaningfulness need not reduce to facts about welfare.

6. Could it matter?

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. In particular, if the value of future cultural production doesn’t reduce to the value of welfare, 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. Claiming that future cultural activity that doesn’t realize welfare would be pointless is not dialectically persuasive; it merely expresses the welfarist commitments that, on the interpretation I have given, *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 deemed 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 disappointed if it is not. Similarly, insofar as we identify with humanity, the first scenario might appropriately engender more pride, the second less. 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 it was suggested that considerations of meaningfulness may sometimes conflict with considerations of welfare. If so, then though 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, of course, 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 radically 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.\(^8\)

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 unhistorical in the sense that history only matters contingently, not in any deep way. The principle 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; so long as the math works out right, we should prefer one generation over many generations. *Opportunity Cost* treats the time and space axes as symmetrical. The only reason to favor the perpetuating 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: it can be increased indefinitely. By contrast, *Unfinished

\(^8\) It is plausible that meaning in individual lives requires not only genuinely worthwhile activity but appropriate subjective investment in such activity (Wolf 2010). Does something similar hold for meaningful collective processes? It may depend on the type of process. But even if there is 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.
Business is essentially historical and appeals to a bounded value. It doesn’t say that it would be good for there to be more meaningful achievements in the history of the universe; it says that it would be meaningful to make headway, and perhaps complete, valuable cultural projects with telic structure. Such projects are essentially historical, and they realize a kind of value that is bounded by its very nature.

It is worth seeing that in this regard Unfinished Business contrasts not only with Opportunity Cost but with a wider family of views that are essentially shapeless. For example, 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 types of view center on values (valuable forms of culture, welfare) 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.

In virtue of the kind of value it appeals to, Unfinished Business allows significant contingency to enter explanations of extinction’s badness. Suppose we had remained in a condition similar to our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Then extinction would presumably have been bad, but not for the reasons at issue in Unfinished Business. For example, assuming hunter-gatherer cultures are valuable, and hunter-gatherer lives are worth living, then extinction would have been bad because more such culture and more such life would have been a good thing. The reasons at issue in Unfinished Business, however, would not have applied: these 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. It follows that Unfinished Business highlights reasons for extinction’s badness that are limited in scope. If humanity had never embarked on its civilizational adventure, or if it someday reached a stable equilibrium point at which
there were no further valuable goal-directed collective tasks that required completion, there would be nothing valuable requiring completion and, consequently, no disvalue in extinction.

That, one might think, is a very implausible result. Shapeless views don’t share this defect: they can explain what would have been bad about humanity’s extinction if we had remained in the condition of hunter-gatherers, 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—and what that something is. It does seem plausible that Unfinished Business succeeds in highlighting a distinctive bad-making feature, even if it 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 and vindicates the intuition that something about the historical drama might itself be ethically significant.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to make sense of Unfinished Business as a distinctive and interesting type of view about the badness of extinction. On the interpretation I have proposed, our concern that there be certain kinds of future cultural achievements turns out to be closely connected to considerations of meaningfulness. The topic of meaningfulness as it applies to humanity and its future deserves further investigation. How widespread are meaning-oriented concerns in our future-oriented thought?
What, if any, normative significance do they have? It surely seems implausible to ascribe massive weight to considerations of meaningfulness and scant weight to welfare. But this is a point about comparative weight and says nothing about whether considerations of meaningfulness have independent weight. As I have attempted to show, it is at least prima facia plausible to think that they do have such weight. And if they do, it would be good to clarify what kind of weight they have, how they might compete with or complement, considerations of welfare, and how we can make rational decisions involving trade-offs between these apparently distinct dimensions of value.
Bibliography


