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Against the Supposed Obligation to Prolong the Human Species

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ABSTRACT: Advocates of Mars colonies commonly assert a supposed obligation to act so as to maximize the longevity of the human species. When this principle is defended, it is often by appeal to the alleged costs—of incoherence or misanthropy—of denying it. Against this supposed obligation, I argue for two theses. The modest thesis: it is not incoherent and need not be misanthropic to prefer human extinction sooner rather than later. The ambitious thesis: we should prefer human extinction sooner rather than later. The supposed obligation to prolong our species is no justification of human activities in space.

KEYWORDS: space ethics, environmental ethics, anti-natalism, space colonies, Mars colonies

The purpose of everything, from pots to people, seems to be to survive as long as possible, and anything that is not durable is not valued.
—Anthony Doerr, *Cloud Cuckoo Land*

There may be things that have a higher claim than the survival or happiness of humanity.
—C.S. Lewis on Arthur Clarke's *Childhood's End* in a letter to Joy Gresham

No, the world must be peopled.
—Spoken by Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*

1 Introduction

The standard moral argument for colonizing Mars (or other outer space locations) is an argument from principle:

1. We should act so as to maximize the longevity of the human species.
2. Colonizing Mars is likely to maximize the longevity of the human species.

Therefore, we should colonize Mars.

Debate has focused on the second premise. Critics and supporters alike typically assume, at least for the sake of argument, that the first premise is true (Ćirković 2019; Cockell 2002; Gottlieb 2019; Klein 2007; Macauley 2007; Marino 2019; Munevar 2014; Musk 2017; Schwartz 2011; Stoner 2017; Szocik et al. 2020). Which is fair enough, since most readers come to the table already accepting premise 1. When authors do undertake a defense of premise 1, it is often to argue that *rejecting* it would be incoherent or misanthropic or both (Abney 2019; Green 2019; Smith 2021),¹ as in this passage from Brian Patrick Green’s *Space Ethics* textbook:

There are people who say that humanity is destructive and therefore either ought to stay on Earth in order to contain its destructive tendencies or actually deserves to go extinct because it is incorrigibly evil. These eco-nihilists... argue against space exploration because it would just spread humankind’s evils to the rest of the universe.... In its extreme form, the notion that the only ethically aware creature that we know of *ought to be destroyed because it is evil* is an ethical argument for removing ethics from the universe (thus contradicting the basis of its own argument) and is therefore logically incoherent. Nevertheless this position is occasionally voiced by people who do not seem to care that they are being logically incoherent and ethically self-contradictory. (Green 2022, 7–8)

In this essay I argue for one modest and one ambitious thesis. My modest thesis: preferring human extinction sooner rather than later is not incoherent and need not be misanthropic; premise 1 of the standard argument for space colonies, if it is to be defended, needs more robust defense than *reductios* like Green’s. My ambitious thesis: we *should* prefer our own extinction sooner rather than later; premise 1 of the standard argument is probably false.

My arguments rely on the following example of a situation in which the right thing to do is to choose human extinction sooner rather than later.

2 Bea’s Tragedy

Hwæt! Hear now the tale of Bea Schaeffer-Wulf, intrepid explorer of the planets of distant suns. On a mission to Planet Claire, Bea crashlands, her ship’s engines and communications equipment irreparably wrecked. Luckily for Bea, Planet Claire hosts a complex, thriving ecosystem that produces a bounty of human-edible food and plentiful subjects worthy of study. Bea finds several advanced lifeforms on Claire including, in its litoral zones, a community of crustacean-like

¹ Literature from longtermists and anti-natalists could be developed to support or oppose space colonies, but I am aware of only two publications that engage with premise 1 of the standard argument for Mars colonies in ways similar to what I aim to do here. Tony Milligan (2015) offers a substantive though qualified defense of premise 1 in terms of obligations we owe to members of our moral community. Adam Potthast offers examples intended “to show that there are some forms of the survival of the human species which would not be desirable” (Potthast 2019, 43). I aim to build on Potthast by offering an example that suggests Milligan is right to worry that we should “focus upon our community being a good one rather than an indefinitely prolonged one” (Milligan 2015, 76).

creatures, vaguely reminiscent of Earth's rock lobsters. The Rock Lobsters are gentle, creative, sensitive, and unmistakably intelligent. They share with Bea their sand paintings, they encourage her to play with their young, they tend to her wounds when she falls on a barnacle-encrusted rock.

Bea quickly comes to value her new environment, especially the Rock Lobsters. She feels an obligation to do right by them. But, she learns, they feel no *obligations* to her, because they have no concept of obligation, no abstract category of ethical value, no notion of deontic constraint, no moral sense of "should." The Rock Lobsters are naturally such that they have never needed these concepts. They are kind, gentle, helpful, etc. with no sense that they *ought* to be this way or that they would act *wrongly* were they to act otherwise.

And now, as fanciful examples must, the story takes a dark turn. During her first years on Planet Claire, Bea observes a marked decline in the health of its biosphere. Individual creatures are dying, local ecosystems collapsing, entire species are fading into extinction. Even the Rock Lobsters are wilting. Research reveals the cause: Bea's human brain waves disrupt the metabolic pathways of nearly all life that evolved on Claire. If Bea chooses to remain alive, within the decade thousands of species, including the Rock Lobsters, will fall extinct. If, instead, Bea chooses to allow herself to die, Claire, its ecosystems, and its Rock Lobsters will recover.

After exploring and rejecting every possible technological solution, in mounting horror at the destruction she unwillingly causes, Bea chooses to stop eating, bids farewell to her friends among the Rock Lobsters, and dies. Thus ends the tale of Bea Schaeffer-Wulf.

It is not incoherent for Bea, the only moral agent on Planet Claire, to choose to sacrifice herself to save the many moral patients there. She has found herself in a situation in which the only way she can preserve the things she herself values is to choose to hasten human extinction on Claire. That's no more logically incoherent or ethically self-contradictory than a soldier choosing to throw themselves on grenades to save their friends. If Bea *wants* to sacrifice herself for the sake of Claire, that sacrifice is *rational*. And I, for one, agree with her judgment that sacrificing herself is what she *should* do.

How might Brian Patrick Green respond? I do not know, but perhaps he would object that even if Bea chooses to die, there are still humans back on Earth whose luscious ethical apparatus makes her decision a noble act of sacrifice, not an incoherent act of eco-nihilism. In choosing to die, Bea doesn't remove *all* *valuers* from the universe, she removes only herself.

But this won't do. Bea has crashed on Planet Claire *and is permanently cut off from communication with Earth*. She has no idea if humanity is thriving or if, instead, humanity has perished in a global disaster. I see no reason to think that the impossibility of communication with Earth should change Bea's thinking about how to act on Claire. If she believes she owes it to these sensitive, creative creatures not to extinct them, it is not incoherent to allow herself to die even though she has lost touch with Earth. What would be stupid, sad, and immoral (though not incoherent) would be to insist that Bea *must* cling to life—thereby imposing terrible costs on Planet Claire—because she does not know how fares the human race.

Bea's Tragedy is sufficient to establish my modest claim: preferring human extinction sooner rather than later is not incoherent and need not be misanthropic. If advocates of space colonies are to defend premise 1 of the standard argument, they will need to turn toward positive defenses of the value of maximal longevity and away from facile *reductios*.

Many authors have, of course, argued that continued human existence is valuable in a variety of special ways.² I doubt that any of these values will yield an all-things-considered obligation to prolong our species. As we shall see, premise 1 of the standard argument is probably false.

3 Bea's Argument

Bea's Tragedy can function as a described case grounding an argument from analogy for my ambitious thesis: human extinction is a goal we should seek. Hwæt again:

1. Bea Schaeffer-Wulf *should* choose her own death to save the creatures and ecosystems she values on Planet Claire.
2. Present-day humans' position on Earth is relevantly similar to Bea's position on Claire.

Therefore, present-day humans *should* choose our own extinction to save the creatures and ecosystems we value on Earth.

Several similarities between us and Bea support premise 2. We have already caused the collapse of ecosystems and the extinction of countless species. Like Bea, we confidently expect that our continued existence will cause much more environmental destruction. Like Bea, we do not cause this destruction from malice—we seem to be wired with desires and patterns of action that cause this environmental destruction as a regretted side-effect of us being ourselves. Like Bea, we *do* value the creatures and environments we harm—people who are not unsettled by the prospect of the extinction of elephants, whales, polar bears, and so on, are mercifully rare.

Those similarities give Bea's Argument initial plausibility. Are there morally relevant differences between us and Bea? Several differences fail to undermine the argument.

3.1 Bea cannot live lightly on Claire; we could live lightly on Earth.

I have sketched Bea's situation as *tragic*; she is biologically constituted in such a way that she cannot help but destroy the environment she loves. Objection 3.1 posits, instead, a *misanthropic* view of humanity: we *could* live lightly in the environments we love, but we choose not to.

I incline to the tragic view. Considering the arc of human history, it is difficult to muster evidence that we could choose to live lightly on the Earth. Our problem isn't capitalism or socialism, industry or agriculture, monotheism or atheism. Humans appear to have caused megafauna extinctions everywhere we showed up, long before any of these technological or cultural innovations (Andermann et al. 2020). And though we are able, in narrow circumstances, to modify our behaviors to harm less severely a particular population or a specific patch of land,

² Émile Torres discusses many such arguments in their comprehensive *Human Extinction* (2023).

these successes are never part of a systematic effort to alter our behavior toward our environment. Global warming charges ahead; the sixth extinction proceeds apace.

But perhaps you, unlike me, incline to the misanthropic view that humanity destroys its environments because we choose to, not because we must. If so, Bea's Argument still works. We need only modify Bea to parallel the misanthropic view of humanity.

Suppose Bea were perfectly capable of adapting her thought patterns in a way that would allow her to live a long, full life in harmonious balance with Planet Claire's biosphere. Changing would take focused effort, and her life after modifying her thought patterns would be different in some ways from her life before. On the one hand, Bea doesn't want to destroy broad swaths of life on Claire, but on the other, she finds the prospect of living with modified thought patterns unappealing; she has no complaints about the thought patterns she grew up with. In this case, the obligation that binds Bea is a disjunction: she must choose either to die or to change her thought patterns to be compatible with life on Claire. What Bea may not permissibly do is choose to continue destroying broad swaths of life on Claire while aspiring one day to be a person with the wherewithal to modify her thought patterns.

If Bea chooses to die rather than modify her thought patterns, that may be baffling, but it is not incoherent; that decision satisfies perfectly well the disjunctive obligation that binds her. Whether our own abject failure to change our environmentally destructive values and practices is a consequence of unwillingness or inability, the misanthropic and the tragic versions of Bea's story both support the same conclusion. Like Bea, we should choose to exit our environment in order to preserve it.

3.2 Bea is *the* cause of environmental destruction on Claire; only *some* humans are the cause of environmental destruction on Earth.

Some communities on Earth do indeed produce much more environmental destruction than others. For two reasons, I doubt that this fact constitutes a genuine difference between our situation and Bea's.

First, among the lowest-impact communities on Earth, at least some are low-impact because an unjust distribution of global resources forces them to be. To constitute a genuine difference with Bea, we need examples of communities that are minimally destructive *because* they are committed to balance with nature and would continue to live a minimally destructive life were they economically able to seize the (short-term) security, comfort, power, and convenience that environmental destruction affords.

Second, nearly everyone—including people in low-impact developing economies—is implicated in the global network of choices, behaviors, relationships, and exchanges that results in environmental devastation. Although Western economies bear the lion's share of responsibility, few communities contribute nothing to humanity's global thriving and concomitant environmental destruction (Sharp 2020). The same is true of those communities, embedded within developed economies, that espouse and pursue an ethic of balance with nature. Living a life of balance with nature while engaged with the culture and commerce of our fellow humans is

extraordinarily difficult and may be impossible. Among those who aspire to an ethic of balance, I know no one who does not “fear that a world made of gifts cannot coexist with a world made of commodities” (Kimmerer 2013, 374).

Bea’s Argument would not apply to communities that *actually* contribute nothing to environmental destruction *because* they are committed to balance with nature. I doubt such communities exist. If they do, their existence would prove that objection 3.1 is correct to assert that the rest of us—including, surely, readers of this paper—contribute to environmental destruction when we could choose otherwise. In that case, I stand by the response I gave in section 3.1.

3.3 Bea’s case requires her death; human extinction requires us to stop breeding.

This difference strengthens the argument. Imagine an alternative version of Bea’s story in which her brain waves are compatible with the thriving of life on Planet Claire. Imagine that she has a supply of frozen embryos she could choose to implant should she wish to reproduce. But she knows that *fetal* brain waves will rain destruction on Planet Claire’s ecology, extinguishing species including the Rock Lobsters. She could choose to live out her life, childless, or she could choose to have the child she wants, at the expense of broad swaths of life on Claire. In this version of the story, in which Bea need not sacrifice her own life, but instead must forgo the experiences of pregnancy and parenting, the obligation to choose to end her species is unchanged. If anything, it is stronger, as the sacrifice required of her is lesser.

3.4 Bea can decide for herself to die; choosing human extinction requires collective action.

This is a practical difficulty, not a morally relevant one. Imagine a ship of five-hundred explorers crashes on Claire. They come to learn that if they reproduce they will destroy Claire’s biosphere including its Rock Lobsters. It is likely that they *will* struggle to implement a collective decision not to reproduce. That doesn’t change the judgment that they *should* collectively decide not to reproduce, and that they are blameworthy if they instead choose to destroy Planet Claire so that they may enjoy the experiences of pregnancy and parenting.

3.5 The Rock Lobsters are more advanced than any non-human animals on Earth.

My strategy in sketching the Rock Lobsters was to gather traits that are recognizable in non-human animals on Earth. Yes, I have stacked several traits on a single imaginary species; the Rock Lobsters seem to have the kindness of elephants, the playfulness of pigs, the cleverness of octopuses, etc. This is not a creative license that is likely to undermine the argument. If you think I’ve made the Rock Lobsters unfairly likable, then modify them to have the traits you value in an Earth species you care deeply about. The argument will still go through.

3.6 Discussion

Bea's Argument gives us reason to believe that we should prefer our own extinction sooner rather than later. This need not be a misanthropic conclusion. Bea Schaeffer-Wulf was a lovely person, an admirable badass, not a monster who deserves to die. But she found herself in an environment to which she was so poorly fit that she, herself, judged it for the best that she depart it. Bea's is a tragic situation, and I believe ours is relevantly similar. I love Octavia Butler and Depeche Mode, science and philosophy, drinks with friends and naps with cats. I have marveled at abstract paintings, acts of kindness, scientific discoveries, and athletic feats. Human extinction will entail a tragic loss of many distinctively human values. But when we weigh in the reckoning the damage we do to environmental values, it becomes clear that, all things considered, we, like Bea, can best preserve the things we value by ceasing to be.

4 Conclusion

I have argued, first, that it is not irrational and need not be misanthropic to prefer human extinction sooner rather than later and, second, that early extinction is what we should prefer.

My goal, in part, in offering these arguments is to make it clear that prolonging humanity is a bad reason to colonize outer space. These are not necessarily arguments against space exploration. Other values could motivate human activity in space: values related to curiosity, creativity, kindness, care. Were we motivated by those values, our goals in space would be radically unlike those urged by colonizers and longtermists. If, in the novel environments of space, we were able to shed the maximalist, immortality-seeking drives that serve us poorly on Earth, our values in a future we embrace as finite—even brief—could be better.

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