

THE AFTERLIFE

Samuel Scheffler

The Tanner Lectures on Human Values

Delivered at

University of California, Berkeley

March 13-15, 2012

[To be published in M. Matheson ed., The Tanner Lectures on Human Values 32

(Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, forthcoming)]

Samuel Scheffler is University Professor and Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University, where he joined the faculty in 2008. He was educated at Harvard and Princeton, and from 1977 to 2008 he taught at the University of California, Berkeley. He works primarily in the areas of moral and political philosophy. His publications include four books: *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (1982), *Human Morality* (1992), *Boundaries and Allegiances* (2001), and *Equality and Tradition* (2010). He has been a Visiting Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and has been awarded Guggenheim and NEH Fellowships. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

## LECTURE I

1. The title of these lectures is, I confess, a bit of a tease. Like many people nowadays, though unlike many others, I do not believe in the existence of an afterlife as normally understood. That is, I do not believe that individuals continue to live on as conscious beings after their biological deaths. To the contrary, I believe that biological death represents the final and irrevocable end of an individual's life. So one thing I will not be doing in these lectures is arguing for the existence of the afterlife as it is commonly understood. At the same time, however, I take it for granted that other human beings will continue to live on after my own death. To be sure, I am aware that human life on earth could, via a number of different routes, come to a sudden and catastrophic end at any time, and that it will, in any case, come to an end eventually. Still, I normally take it for granted that life will go on long after I myself am gone, and in this rather non-standard sense, I take it for granted that there will be an afterlife: that others will continue to live after I have died. I believe that most of us take this

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I am greatly indebted to my commentators at Berkeley – Harry Frankfurt, Seana Shiffrin, and Susan Wolf – for their generous responses and thoughtful challenges. Earlier versions of this material were presented to a number of audiences and I am grateful to the members of those audiences, as well as the audience at Berkeley, for valuable discussion. I am conscious of specific debts to Selim Berker, Eugene Chislenko, Ronald Dworkin, Samuel Freeman, Pamela Hieronymi, Dale Jamieson, Hyunseop Kim, Christine Korsgaard, Liam Murphy, Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, Philip Pettit, Adam Scheffler, Michael Smith, and David Wiggins for helpful comments and questions. And I am particularly grateful to Monika Betzler, Agnes Callard, Ruth Chang, Hannah Ginsborg, Stephen Guest, Janos Kis, Niko Kolodny, Orsolya Reich, John Tasioulas, and Katja Vogt for valuable written comments.

for granted, and it is one of the aims of these lectures to investigate the role of this assumption in our lives.

It is my contention that the existence of an afterlife, in my non-standard sense of “afterlife,” matters greatly to us. It matters to us in its own right, and it matters to us because our confidence in the existence of an afterlife is a condition of many other things that we care about continuing to matter to us. Or so I shall try to show. If my contention is correct, it reveals some surprising features of our attitudes toward our own deaths. In addition, I will argue that the importance to us of the afterlife can help to illuminate what, more generally, is involved in something’s *matter*ing or *being important* to us, or in our *valuing* it. Finally, the role of the afterlife sheds light on the profound but elusive influence of time in our thinking about ourselves, and it affords a convenient point of entry for investigating the various strategies we use for coming to terms with the temporal dimension of our lives.

Most of the attitudes I will discuss, both toward the afterlife and toward what happens during our lives, are in one sense very familiar, almost embarrassingly so. There is very little that I will be saying in these lectures that we don’t, on some level, already know. Nevertheless, I believe that the attitudes I will discuss can bear additional scrutiny. As I have tried to suggest, I think that we can learn something about ourselves by reflecting on them, and some of what we learn may even surprise us.

As I have already indicated, the attitudes I have in mind involve a family of related concepts, such as the concept of *valuing* a thing, or *caring* about it, or of the thing’s *matter*ing or *being important* to us. Each of these concepts differs in some respects from the others, and the differences are significant for some

purposes. Elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> I have examined the concept of valuing in particular, and I want to begin by saying something about how I understand that notion. Like many others who have written on the topic, I believe that there is an important distinction between valuing something and believing that it is valuable. Valuing, in my view, comprises a complex syndrome of interrelated attitudes and dispositions, which includes but is not limited to a belief that the valued item is valuable. Valuing something normally involves, in addition to such a belief, at least the following elements: a susceptibility to experience a range of context-dependent emotions concerning the valued item, a disposition to experience those emotions as being merited or deserved, and a disposition to treat certain kinds of considerations pertaining to the valued item as reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts. Thus, valuing is an attitudinal phenomenon that has doxastic, deliberative, motivational, and emotional dimensions.

As I have said, the other concepts I have mentioned – the concept of *caring* about something or of the thing's *mattering* or *being important* to us – differ from the concept of valuing, and from each other, in ways that deserve attention, but I will not provide that attention here. For the purposes of this discussion, what these concepts have in common is more important than the ways in which they differ. Or so, at any rate, I will assume. I will rely from time to time on the account of valuing that I have just sketched, but I will also draw freely on other members of this family of concepts as the context seems to me to demand, and I will not investigate the relations among them nor will I comment explicitly on the ways in which they differ from one another.

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<sup>1</sup> "Valuing," in *Equality and Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Chapter One, pp. 15-40.

I have said that I want to investigate certain of *our* attitudes, and so let me say a word about how I am using the first-person plural pronoun. When I talk about *our* attitudes and what *we* think or feel, I do not intend to be making strictly universal claims. I do not mean to claim, in other words, that literally everyone is prone to these attitudes. My use of the first-person plural might instead be thought of, to borrow some terminology that David Lewis employed in a related context, as a “wait-and-see” use. In explaining his version of a dispositional theory of value, Lewis wrote: “In making a judgment of value, one makes many claims at once, some stronger than others, some less confidently than others, and waits to see which can be made to stick. I say X is a value; I mean that all mankind are disposed to value X; or anyway all nowadays are; or anyway all nowadays are except maybe some peculiar people on distant islands, or anyway...; or anyway you and I, talking here and now, are; or anyway I am. How much am I claiming? – as much as I can get away with. If my stronger claims were proven false...I still mean to stand by the weaker ones. So long as I’m not challenged, there’s no need to back down in advance; and there’s no need to decide how far I’d back down if pressed.”<sup>2</sup> To put it a slightly different way, in characterizing *our* attitudes, I mean to be characterizing my own attitudes and the attitudes of any other people who share them, however numerous those people happen to be. On the one hand, I don’t think that the attitudes are mine alone. On the other hand, I don’t wish to claim that they are universally shared, and so in that respect I am prepared to be more concessive from the outset than is Lewis. Indeed, one limitation on the scope of my claims was implicit in my

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<sup>2</sup> David Lewis, “Dispositional Theories of Value,” in *Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 68-94, at p. 85).

opening remarks. The attitudes I will describe are, in the first instance, the attitudes of people who, like me, do not believe in the afterlife as traditionally understood. What my discussion reveals about the attitudes of those who do believe in the traditional afterlife is a topic to which I will return briefly at the end of the second lecture. In the meantime, my discussion of “our” attitudes will proceed on the assumption that “we” do not believe that we will live on after our own deaths. Despite this limitation, I believe that the attitudes I will describe are common enough to be of interest.

2. I will begin by asking you to consider a crude and morbid thought experiment. Suppose you knew that, although you yourself would live a normal lifespan, the earth would be completely destroyed thirty days after your death in a collision with a giant asteroid. How would this knowledge affect your attitudes during the remainder of your life? Now, rather than respond straightaway, you may well protest that I haven’t given you enough information to go on. How, in my imagined scenario, are we to suppose that you acquired your doomsday knowledge? Are other people in on the secret, or is this devastating piece of information your solitary burden to bear? I haven’t told you, and yet surely the answers to these questions might affect your reactions. I freely concede these points. I also concede that, even if I were to fill in the story in the greatest possible detail, I would still be asking you to make conjectures about your attitudes under what I trust are highly counterfactual circumstances. Such conjectures, you may point out, are of questionable reliability and in any case impossible to verify. All of this is true. But indulge me for a few minutes. Perhaps, despite the skimpiness of the description I have provided and the

conjectural character of any response you may give, some things will seem relatively clear.

You won't be surprised to learn that, although I have asked you how you would react, I'm not going to let you speak for yourself, at least not just yet. Instead I'm going to make some conjectures of my own, conjectures about the kinds of reactions that you and I and others – that “we” – would be likely to have in the situation I have described. I will begin with a negative suggestion. One reaction that I think few of us would be likely to have, if confronted with my doomsday scenario, is complete indifference. For example, few of us would be likely to say, if told that the earth would be destroyed thirty days after our death: “So what? Since it won't happen until thirty days after my death, and since it won't hasten my death, it isn't of any importance to me. I won't be around to experience it, and so it doesn't matter to me in the slightest.” The fact that we would probably not respond this way is already suggestive. It means that, at a minimum, we are not indifferent to everything that happens after our deaths. Something that will not happen until after our deaths can still matter or be important to us. And this in turn implies that things other than our own experiences matter to us. A post-mortem event that matters to us would not be one of our experiences.

As against this, someone might object that, although the post-mortem event would not be one of our experiences, our prospective contemplation of that event would be part of our experience, and if such contemplation distressed us, then that distress too would be part of our experience. This is undeniable, but it is also beside the point. It does not show that only our own experiences matter to us. In the case at hand, what would matter to us, in the first instance, would

not be our distress – though that might matter to us too – but rather the predicted post-mortem event whose contemplation gave rise to that distress. If the post-mortem event did not matter to us, there would be nothing for us to be distressed about in the first place. So, as I have said, the fact that we would not react to the doomsday scenario with indifference suggests that things that happen after our deaths sometimes matter to us, and that in turn implies that things other than our own experiences matter to us. In this sense, the fact that we would not react with indifference supports a *non-experientialist* interpretation of our values. It supports an interpretation according to which it is not only our experiences that we value or that matter to us.<sup>3</sup>

There is another reaction to the doomsday scenario that I think few of us would be likely to have. Few of us, I think, would be likely to deliberate about the good and bad consequences of the destruction of the earth in order to decide whether it would, on balance, be a good or a bad thing. This is not, I think, because the answer is so immediately and overwhelmingly obvious that we don't need to perform the calculations. It is true, of course, that the destruction of the earth would have many horrible consequences. It would, for example, mean the end of all human joy, creativity, love, friendship, virtue, and happiness. So there are, undeniably, some weighty considerations to place in the minus column. On the other hand, it would also mean the end of all human suffering, cruelty, and injustice. No more genocide, no more torture, no more oppression, no more misery, no more pain. Surely these things all go in the plus column. And it's at least not *instantly* obvious that the minuses outweigh the pluses. Yet

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<sup>3</sup> To that extent, it supports the conclusions drawn by Robert Nozick in his discussion of "the experience machine" in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42-45.

few of us, I think, would react to the scenario by trying to do the sums, by trying to figure out whether on balance the prospect of the destruction of the earth was welcome or unwelcome. On the face of it, at least, the fact that we would not react this way suggests that there is a *non-consequentialist* dimension to our attitudes about what we value or what matters to us. It appears that what we value, or what matters to us, is not simply or solely that the best consequences, whatever they may be, should come to pass.<sup>4</sup>

Let us now move from negative to positive characterizations of our reactions. To begin with, I think it is safe to say that most of us would respond to the doomsday scenario with what I will generically call, with bland understatement, profound dismay. This is meant only as a superficial, placeholder characterization, which undoubtedly subsumes a range of more specific reactions. Many of these reactions have to do with the deaths of the particular people we love and the disappearance or destruction of the particular things that we care most about, where “things” is understood in a broad sense that encompasses not only physical objects but also social forms such as institutions, practices, activities, and ways of life. During our lifetimes, we respond with grief, sadness, and other forms of distress to the sudden death of people we love and the sudden loss or destruction of things that we value

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, someone might argue that, despite the appearances, our reactions do admit of a consequentialist interpretation. Perhaps, in reacting as we do, we simply jump to a possibly erroneous but nevertheless consequentialist conclusion, namely, that the negative consequences I have mentioned would outweigh the positive ones. Or perhaps we accept some axiology according to which the impersonal value of human existence *per se* is so great that any outcome in which human life continues is better than every outcome in which it does not. I don't find these claims very plausible, but I won't argue against them. One aim of these lectures is to offer a different account of why the continuation of human life matters so much to us.

deeply. We are bound to have similar reactions to the prospect that every particular person and thing that we treasure will soon be suddenly destroyed at once.

The fact that we would have these reactions highlights a *conservative* dimension in our attitudes toward what we value, which sits alongside the non-experiential and non-consequentialist dimensions already mentioned. In general, we want the people and things we care about to flourish; we are not indifferent to the destruction of that which matters most to us. Indeed, there is something approaching a conceptual connection between valuing something and wanting it to be sustained or preserved. During our lifetimes, this translates into a similarly close connection between valuing something and seeing reasons to act so as to preserve or sustain it ourselves. Part of the poignancy of contemplating our own deaths, under ordinary rather than doomsday conditions, is the recognition that we will no longer be able to respond to these reasons; we will not ourselves be able to help preserve or sustain the things that matter to us. We can, of course, take steps while we are alive to try to bring it about that other people will act after our deaths to preserve or sustain those things. For example, the devices of wills and bequests are important to us largely because they offer us – or seem to offer us – an opportunity to extend the reach of our own agency beyond death in an effort to help sustain the people and things that matter to us. In addition, some of the most elaborate and ingenious measures we take to try to ensure the post-mortem preservation of our values are those we take as groups rather than as individuals, and I will discuss them at greater length later. But apart from taking steps now to influence the actions of others in the future, all we can really do is to hope that the things that matter most to us will somehow be

preserved or sustained. The doomsday scenario dashes all such hopes, and the emotional consequences of this, for someone facing this scenario, are likely to be profound.

In addition to the generic conservatism about value just noted, something more specific is involved in our reaction to the prospective destruction of the particular *people* we love and treasure. It is a feature of the scenario that I have described that all of our loved ones who survive thirty days beyond our own death will themselves die suddenly, violently, and prematurely, and this prospect itself is sufficient to fill us with horror and dread. In other words, it would fill us with horror and dread even if it were *only* our own loved ones who would be destroyed, and everything and everyone else would survive. Indeed, this dimension of our reaction is liable to be so powerful that it may make it difficult to notice some of the others. For this reason, I want to postpone discussion of it for a few minutes, and to concentrate for a bit longer on our more general reactions to the doomsday scenario.

3. I have so far said only that the prospect of the earth's imminent destruction would induce in us reactions of grief, sadness, and distress. But we must also consider how, if at all, it would affect our subsequent motivations and our choices about how to live. To what extent would we remain committed to our current projects and plans? To what extent would the activities in which we now engage continue to seem worth pursuing? Offhand, it seems that there are many projects and activities that might become less important to us. By this I mean several things. First, our reasons to engage in them might no longer seem to us as strong. At the limit, we might cease to see any reason to engage in them.

Second, our emotional investment in them might weaken. For example, we might no longer feel as eager or excited at the prospect of engaging in them; as frustrated if prevented from engaging in them; as pleased if they seemed to be going well; as disappointed if they seemed not to be going well, and so on. At the limit, we might become emotionally detached from or indifferent to them. Third, our belief that they were worthwhile activities in which to engage might weaken or, at the limit, disappear altogether.

It is difficult to be sure exactly which projects and activities would seem to us diminished in importance in these respects, and no doubt there are interesting differences in the ways that different individuals would react. On the face of it, however, there are several types of projects and activities that would appear fairly obviously to be vulnerable to such changes in our attitudes. Consider, to take one representative example, the project of trying to find a cure for cancer. This project would seem vulnerable for at least two reasons. First, it is a project in which it is understood that ultimate success may be a long way off. Even the very best research that is done today may be but a step on a long road that will lead to a cure, if at all, then only in the indeterminate future. The doomsday scenario, by cutting the future short, makes it much less likely that such a cure will ever be found. Second, the primary value of the project lies in the prospect of eventually being able to cure the disease and to prevent the death and suffering it causes. But the doomsday scenario means that even immediate success in finding a cure would make available such benefits only for a very short period of time. Under these conditions, scientists' motivations to engage in such research might well weaken substantially. This suggests that projects would be specially vulnerable if either a) their ultimate success is seen as

something that may not be achieved until some time well in the future, or b) the value of the project derives from the benefits that it will provide to large numbers of people over a long period of time. Cancer research is threatened because it satisfies both of these conditions. But there are many other projects and activities that satisfy at least one of them. This is true, for example, of much research in science, technology, and medicine. It is also true of much social and political activism. It is true of many efforts to build or reform or improve social institutions. It is true of many projects to build new buildings, improve the physical infrastructure of society, or protect the environment. No doubt you will be able to supply many other examples of your own.

The effect of the doomsday scenario on other types of projects is less clear. For example, many creative and scholarly projects have no obvious practical aim, such as finding a cure for cancer, but they are nevertheless undertaken with an actual or imagined audience or readership of some kind in mind. Although the doomsday scenario would not mean that audiences would disappear immediately, it would mean that they would not be around for very long. Would artistic, musical, and literary projects still seem worth undertaking? Would humanistic scholars continue to be motivated to engage in basic research? Would historians and theoretical physicists and anthropologists all carry on as before? Perhaps, but the answer is not obvious.

Nor is it merely projects of the kinds I have been discussing, as opposed to more routine aspects of human life, whose appeal might weaken or disappear. Consider, for example, procreative activity. Would people still be as motivated to have children if they knew that those children would die no later than thirty days after their own death? It seems unlikely that they would. But if they would

not, then neither would they be as motivated to engage in the wide, varied, and life-altering array of activities associated with raising and caring for children. By contrast, the projects and activities that would seem least likely to be affected by the doomsday scenario are those focused on personal comfort and pleasure. But it is perhaps not altogether obvious what would be comforting and pleasant under doomsday conditions.

The upshot is that many types of projects and activities would no longer seem worth pursuing, or as worth pursuing, if we were confronted with the doomsday scenario. Now it is noteworthy that the attractions of these same projects and activities are not similarly undercut by the mere prospect of our own deaths. People cheerfully engage in cancer research and similar activities despite their recognition that the primary payoff of these activities is not likely to be achieved before their own deaths. Yet, if my argument is correct, their motivation to engage in these same activities would be weakened or even completely undermined by the prospect that, in consequence of the earth's destruction, there would be no payoff *after* their deaths. In other words, there are many projects and activities whose importance to us is not diminished by the prospect of our own deaths but would be diminished by the prospect that everyone else will soon die. So if by the afterlife we mean the continuation of human life on earth after our own deaths, then it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in some significant respects, the existence of the afterlife matters more to us than our own continued existence. It matters more to us because it is a condition of other things mattering to us. Without confidence in the existence of the afterlife, many of the things in our own lives that now matter to us would cease to do so, or would come to matter less.

Of course, there are many things that are causally necessary in order for our pursuits to matter to us now. Without the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere, for example, nothing would matter to us now because we would not be alive. Similarly, we can imagine that some mineral deficiency in our diet might cause us to lose confidence in the value of our pursuits. Yet we would not conclude that the mineral matters more to us than our own future existence because it is a condition of other things mattering to us now. But the point about our confidence in the afterlife is not merely that it is a causal condition of other things mattering to us now. The continuation of life on earth, unlike the mineral, is something that also matters to us in its own right. And unlike a mineral deficiency, the imminent disappearance of human life on earth would strike us as a *reason* why other things no longer mattered as much. Our belief that humanity was about to disappear would not just be a cause of their ceasing to matter to us.

It is easy to underestimate the significance of this point, at least insofar as it concerns goal-oriented projects like trying to find a cure for cancer. It may seem that, although it is true that such projects would become less important to people who were faced with the doomsday scenario, that is simply because it is pointless or irrational to pursue goals that are known to be unachievable. The goal of reducing the suffering and death caused by cancer would be unachievable under doomsday conditions, so engaging in cancer research would be instrumentally irrational under those conditions. This mundane point about instrumental rationality is all that is needed to explain why people would no longer regard such projects as worth pursuing in the doomsday scenario. But this misconstrues the significance of the example. Granted, it is not surprising

that people should lose interest in a goal-oriented project once it is known that the goal of the project is unachievable. What may be surprising, however, is the fact that people are often happy to pursue goals that they do not expect to be achieved until after their own deaths. What the doomsday scenario highlights, in other words, is the extent to which we regard projects as worth undertaking even when the successful completion of those projects is not expected to take place during our own lifetimes. What is significant about the example is what it reveals, not about the familiar role of instrumental rationality in our practical deliberations, but rather about our willingness to harness the resources of instrumental rationality to pursue goals whose achievement will occur only after we are gone.

4. As I have said, I have so far been concentrating on our general reactions to the doomsday scenario and the general attitudes toward the afterlife that they reveal. However, I want now to consider our more specific reactions to one feature of that scenario, namely, that it involves the sudden, simultaneous deaths of everyone that we love or care about. Since the strength of these reactions can blind us to other aspects of our response to the doomsday scenario, I have so far set them aside in the hope of identifying some of our more general attitudes toward the afterlife. But now I want to return to these more specific reactions, and to see what they add to the general picture that has so far emerged. The salient feature of the doomsday scenario, for these purposes, is that everyone we love who is alive thirty days after our own death will then suddenly be killed. What do our powerful reactions to this prospect tell us about ourselves?

Some elements of our reaction seem obvious and straightforward. We don't want the people we love to die prematurely, whether we are alive to witness their deaths or not. We care deeply about them and their well-being, and not merely about the effects on us of setbacks to their well-being. This is just an example of the non-experiential dimension of our values and concerns. So the knowledge that all of the people we love who are still alive thirty days after our own deaths will then die suddenly and more or less prematurely is horrible. That much is clear. Still, I think that there is more to our reaction than this. One way to approach the issue is to ask why it matters to us that at least some people we care about should live on after we die? I take it that most people do regard it as a bad thing if everyone they love or care about dies before they do. Few of us hope to outlive all of our friends and loved ones. Why should this be?

There are, I think, a number of answers to this question and, once again, some of them seem straightforward. The considerations about prematurity just mentioned play a large role, though our preference to predecease at least some of the people we care about may persist even if both we and they are old enough that none of our deaths would qualify as significantly premature. A different kind of consideration is that, if we predecease our loved ones, then we will be spared the pain and grief that we would experience if they died first. Similarly, we will be spared the feelings of loneliness and emptiness and loss to which we may be subject after they are gone. Much better for us if we die first, and they are the ones who have to experience all of the unpleasantness. Much as we love them, it seems, we would rather that they suffered in these ways than that we did.

Relatedly, there may be something like a principle of loss minimization at work here. It's bad enough that we will lose our own lives, but there's nothing we can do about that. Given the inevitability of that one final loss, it's better for us that we not experience, in addition, the separate losses of each of the people we care about. It's better if the pain of our separation from them is simply "folded into" the one great calamity of our own deaths. This is essentially a matter of the efficient organization of personal disaster.

But I think that there is something else going on as well. If, at the time of our deaths, there are people alive whom we love or about whom we care deeply, and with whom we have valuable personal relationships, then one effect of our deaths will be to disrupt those relationships. Odd as it may sound, I think that there is something that strikes us as desirable or at any rate comforting about having one's death involve this kind of relational disruption. It is not that the disruptions per se are desirable or comforting, but rather that the prospect of having one's death involve such disruptions affects one's perceived relation to the future. If at the time of one's death one will be a participant in a larger or smaller network of valuable personal relationships, and if the effect of one's death will be to wrench one out of that network, then this can affect one's pre-mortem understanding of the afterlife: the future that will unfold after one is gone. In a certain sense, it personalizes one's relation to that future. Rather than looming simply as a blank eternity of non-existence, the future can be conceptualized with reference to an ongoing social world in which one retains a social identity. One can imagine oneself into that world simply by imagining the resumption of one's pre-mortem relationships with people who will themselves continue to exist and to remember and care for one. One needn't fear, as many

people apparently do, that one will simply be forgotten as soon as one is gone. In fact, to a surprising extent, many people seem to feel that not being remembered is what being “gone” really consists in and, correspondingly, those who are bereaved often feel a powerful imperative not to forget the people they have lost. Faced with the fear of being forgotten, the fact that there are other people who value their relations with you and who will continue to live after you have died makes it possible to feel that you have a place in the social world of the future even if, due to the inconvenient fact of your death, you will not actually be able to take advantage of it. The world of the future becomes, as it were, more like a party one had to leave early and less like a gathering of strangers.

There may be a temptation to protest that the attitudes I have just described are silly or irrational. Death is in fact final, and its finality is not increased if one is forgotten or diminished if one is remembered. Dying, not being forgotten, is what being “gone” consists in. In any case, even if one is remembered for awhile, the memories will fade and the people who remember will themselves die soon enough, so it’s only a matter of time before nobody who remembers any of us personally will survive. But these protests are beside the point. On the one hand, my aim has not been to show that our attitudes are rational, but, on the other hand, the claim that they are irrational appears to depend on just the kind of experientialism that I have tried to discredit. The fact is that it does matter to us to have other people we care about live on after we die, and it also matters to us to be remembered, at least for awhile. These things matter to us, I have argued, partly because they help to personalize our relation to the future. One reason why we react so strongly to the doomsday scenario is that it seems to render our own relation to the future incurably bleak. We are

used to the idea that we ourselves will not be a part of the future after our deaths. In the doomsday scenario, we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that nobody we care about will be a part of the future either, and that fact, I have suggested, makes the future itself seem more alien, forbidding, empty. It is idle to protest that, if we were rational, it would seem just as empty to us even if the doomsday scenario were suspended and we could be assured that the people we care about would live normal life spans. Why, the protester asks, should we take comfort in their survival given that they too will die soon enough? But the vantage point from which these attitudes are judged irrational enjoys no special privilege or authority. If the idea that some of the people we care about will live on is one of the things that enables us to make our peace with the future, and if, in reacting that way, we make no error of reasoning and rely on no false belief, then the basis for criticism is obscure.

I should say something at this point about children. I have been arguing that our participation in valued relationships with people we hope will outlive us transforms our attitudes toward the future after we are gone. It is obvious that, for people who have children, their relationships with their children have a special role to play here. The desire for a personalized relation to the future is one of the many reasons why people attach such importance to those relationships, and why the loss of a child is one of the most devastating things that can happen to a person. But I have deliberately avoided making children central to the argument, because I do not think that the desire for a personalized relation to the future is limited to people with children, nor do I think that relationships with children are the only kinds of personal relationships that can help to satisfy that desire. Those who tend to think about things in the terms of

evolutionary biology will point out that it is all too easy to explain in those terms why people should be motivated to have biological descendants who will survive them. For the purposes of my argument, however, these explanations are doubly irrelevant. They are irrelevant, first, because the relationships that can help to satisfy the desire for a personalized relation to the future are not limited to relationships with one's biological descendants. And they are irrelevant, second, because I am interested simply in the fact that we have that desire and in its relations to others of our attitudes. An evolutionary explanation of the desire would not show that we do not have it, or that it is not a genuine desire, any more than an evolutionary explanation of our perceptual abilities would show that we do not really have those abilities or an evolutionary explanation of parental love would show that it is not really love.

At this point, let me pause to summarize the arguments I have presented so far. First, I have argued that our reactions to the doomsday scenario highlight some general features of the phenomenon of human valuing, which I have referred to as its nonexperientialist, nonconsequentialist, and conservative dimensions. We do not care only about our own experiences. We do not care only that the best consequences should come to pass. And we do want the things that we value to be sustained and preserved over time. Second, I have argued that the afterlife matters to us, and in more than one way. What happens after our deaths matters to us in its own right and, in addition, our confidence that there will be an afterlife is a condition of many other things mattering to us here and now. Third, I have argued that the doomsday scenario highlights some of our attitudes toward time, particularly our impulse to personalize our relation to the future.

5. Let me now try to expand on these provisional conclusions. As I have noted, death poses a problem for our conservatism about value. We want to act in ways that will help preserve and sustain the things that we value, but death marks the end of our ability to do this. As I have also noted, death poses a problem for our relationship with time. We want to personalize our relation to the future, and yet for most of the future we will no longer be alive. I have already made some suggestions about how we attempt to deal with these two problems as individuals. In the first case, we take steps while we are alive to ensure that others will act so as to sustain those values after our deaths. In the second case, our participation in valued personal relationships with people whom we hope will outlive us transforms our attitudes toward the future after we are gone.

These responses are important but they have their limits. Many people supplement them by participating in group-based responses as well. One of the most important ways in which people attempt to preserve and sustain their values, for example, is by participating in traditions that themselves support those values. Traditions are, as I have said elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> human practices whose organizing purpose is to preserve what is valued beyond the lifespan of any single individual or generation. They are collaborative, multi-generational enterprises devised by human beings precisely to satisfy the deep human impulse to preserve what is valued. In subscribing to a tradition that embodies values one embraces, or whose own value one embraces, one seeks to ensure the

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<sup>5</sup> "The Normativity of Tradition," in *Equality and Tradition*, Chapter Eleven, pp. 287-311.

survival over time of what one values. Although traditions are not themselves guaranteed to survive, a flourishing tradition will typically have far greater resources to devote to the preservation of values, and very different kinds of resources, than any single individual is likely to have. So by participating in traditions that embody the values to which they are committed, individuals can leverage their own personal efforts to ensure the survival of those values. In addition, they can think of themselves as being, along with their fellow traditionalists, the custodians of values that will eventually be transmitted to future generations. In this sense, participation in a tradition is not only an expression of our natural conservatism about values but also a way of achieving a *value-based* relation to those who come after us. We can think of our successors as people who will share our values, and ourselves as having custodial responsibility for the values that will someday be theirs.<sup>6</sup>

Our efforts to personalize our relations to the future also take group-based forms. In addition to participating in valued personal relations with other specific individuals, at least some of whom we hope will survive us, many people also belong to, and value their membership in, communal or national groups, most of whose members they do not know personally. Often it becomes important to them that these groups should survive after they are gone. Indeed, for some people, the survival of the community or the clan or the people or the nation has an importance that is comparable to – or nearly comparable to – the importance they attach to the survival of their loved ones. Similarly, the

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<sup>6</sup> By the same token, of course, participation in a tradition also enables us to feel that we have inherited values handed down to us by others, and in this way makes it possible for us to achieve a value-based relation to those who came before us. For discussion, see “The Normativity of Tradition,” page 305.

prospect that the group will survive after they as individuals are gone serves to personalize their relation to the future in much the same way as does the prospect that their own loved ones will survive. Even if, by contrast to the latter case, the survival of the group does not mean that one will personally be remembered, it nevertheless gives one license to imagine oneself as retaining a social identity in the world of the future. In neither case does this involve the false belief that one will actually survive one's death. It merely allows one to think that if, contrary to fact, one did survive, one would remain socially at home in the world. If I am right, this is a surprisingly powerful and comforting thought for many people. It provides assurance that, socially speaking, at least, the world of the future is not an altogether alien place. Max Weber may have been right to say that we live in a disenchanted world,<sup>7</sup> but I believe that many people who find the lack of enchantment tolerable or even welcome nevertheless remain troubled by, and go to some lengths to preclude, the prospect of a depersonalized world. The group-based strategy for personalizing one's relation to the future offers some clear advantages as compared with reliance solely on the survival of particular individuals, since – at the risk of belaboring the obvious – groups can enjoy much greater longevity than can any single individual.

I have described separately the group-based solutions people use to help solve two different problems posed by death: the problem of preserving our values and the problem of establishing a personalized relation to the future. But, except for heuristic purposes, it is artificial to think of the two types of solution as being mutually independent, for to a very great extent they overlap. The

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<sup>7</sup> See Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in David Owen and Tracy Strong eds., *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 1-31.

value-sustaining traditions that help to solve the first problem must themselves be sustained by communities of people, and the communal or national groups that help to solve the second problem are normally unified by their shared allegiance to a set of values. So in availing oneself of one of these solutions, one is normally availing oneself of the other as well. In relying on a tradition to help preserve our values, we are seeking to create a future whose inhabitants will share with us some of the commitments that matter most to us. To that extent, the conservative impulse, although it is naturally thought of as embodying an attitude toward the past, is also, perforce, an impulse to create a personalized relation to the future. Conversely, in seeking to ensure the survival of communal or national groups that matter to us, we are seeking to create a future in which the values we have historically shared with other members of the group will continue to endure. To that extent, the impulse to personalize our relation to the future is also, perforce, an impulse to conserve our values, and in that respect it embodies an attitude toward the past. Ultimately, both solutions are part of a unified attempt to defend and extend the coherence and integrity of our selves and our values over time, in the face of the apparently insuperable problems posed by our deaths. Needless to say, these efforts can never be completely successful. Only survival could give us all of what we want, and survival is not an option. So, like the biblical Moses denied access to the Promised Land, we stand gazing through the lens of shared values and history toward a future we will not enter.

6. Of course, the doomsday scenario thwarts the group-based solutions as decisively as it thwarts their more individualistic counterparts, since the

traditions and groups upon which those solutions rely will also be destroyed when the doomsday collision takes place. This raises questions about the motivational sustainability under doomsday conditions of a whole new range of projects, in addition to those surveyed earlier. For example, many people have projects that are defined in relation to a particular tradition. Some of these projects may be meant to enhance or contribute to or enrich or sustain the tradition. Others may simply take up options that the tradition itself makes available, and which only make sense within the framework of the tradition and its practices, history, and self-understanding. Similarly, many people have projects that are defined in relation to a particular community or nation or people. Some of these projects may be meant to contribute to the flourishing of the group or its institutions. Others may be designed to help the group realize certain of its aims and aspirations. Again, still others may simply take up options that the group makes available and which only make sense within the framework of its practices and self-understanding.

Would projects of these kinds retain their motivational appeal under doomsday conditions? In other words, would pursuing such projects continue to seem important to individuals who had previously been committed to them if those individuals knew that the tradition or community that was the focus or the source of their project would be destroyed thirty days after their own death? Or would it then seem to them less important to persevere with their projects? Would they see less reason to do so? The answer, of course, may depend on the nature of the particular project in question. And there might well be some variation from individual to individual. But it seems plausible that many tradition-dependent and group-dependent projects would come to seem less

important to people. This seems especially true of projects whose explicit aim either was or was dependent on the long-term survival and flourishing of a particular tradition or group, for those projects would now be known in advance to be doomed to failure. And so we have here another important range of examples of the phenomenon noted earlier, in which our confidence in the existence of an afterlife is a condition of our projects continuing to matter to us while we are alive.

7. However, these examples may create or reinforce the impression that, to the extent that our confidence in the existence of an afterlife has this kind of importance for us, it is really the post-mortem survival of specific individuals or groups that we care about. I have already noted that one effect of the doomsday scenario is to highlight the importance we attach to the survival of the particular people who matter to us, and we have now seen that the survival of particular groups and traditions may be of comparable importance, at least for some people. In general, the desire to personalize our relation to the future, which is one of the desires whose tacit power is revealed by the doomsday scenario, is a desire that seems to require *particularistic* satisfaction. What enables us to establish a personalized relation to the future, it seems, is our confidence in the survival after our deaths of some particular people we love or particular groups or traditions to which we are committed. And this may tempt us to conclude that the afterlife that matters to us is the afterlife of those people alone.

Yet this conclusion is too hasty. Recall that, when first discussing the doomsday scenario, I deliberately concentrated on our more general reactions to the scenario, and provisionally set aside our more specific responses to the

prospect that our own loved ones would die. The aim was to prevent the power of those more particularistic responses from obscuring other, less conspicuous elements of our reaction. So in discussing various projects that might come to matter less to us, I deliberately focused on projects, such as the project of engaging in cancer research, that lacked any obvious dependence on particularistic loyalties or affections. To the extent that pursuing that project would come to seem less important to a researcher confronting the doomsday scenario, it is not because the scenario involves the imminent death of particular people she loves or the destruction of particular groups to which she belongs and is committed. If that is correct, then our concern for the existence of an afterlife is not solely a concern for the survival of particular people or groups.

This conclusion can be strengthened. It is clear that the prospective destruction of the particular people we care about would be sufficient for us to react with horror to an impending global disaster, and that the elimination of human life as a whole would not be necessary. But, surprisingly perhaps, it seems that the reverse is also true. The imminent disappearance of human life would be sufficient for us to react with horror even if it would not involve the premature death of any of our loved ones. This, it seems to me, is one lesson of P.D. James's novel *Children of Men*,<sup>8</sup> which was published in 1992, and a considerably altered version of which was made into a film in 2006 by the Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón. The premise of James's novel, which is set in 2021, is that human beings have become infertile, with no recorded birth

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<sup>8</sup> James's novel was first published by Faber and Faber Ltd. (London, 1992). Page references, which will be given parenthetically in the text, are to the Vintage Books edition published by Random House in 2006.

having occurred in over 25 years. The human race thus faces the prospect of imminent extinction as the last generation to be born gradually dies out.<sup>9</sup> The plot of the book revolves around the unexpected pregnancy of an English woman and the ensuing attempts of a small group of people to ensure the safety and freedom of the woman and her baby. For our purposes, however, what is relevant is not this central plot line, with its overtones of Christian allegory, but rather James's imaginative dystopian portrayal of life on earth prior to the discovery of the redemptive pregnancy. And what is notable is that her asteroid-free variant of the doomsday scenario does not require anyone to die prematurely. It is entirely compatible with every living person having a normal life span. So if we imagine ourselves inhabiting James's infertile world and we try to predict what our reactions would be to the imminent disappearance of human life on earth, it is clear that those reactions would not include any feelings about the premature deaths of our loved ones, for no such deaths would occur (or at any rate, none would occur as an essential feature of James's scenario itself). To the extent that we would nevertheless find the prospect of human extinction disturbing or worse, our imagined reaction lacks the particularistic

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<sup>9</sup> On July 28, 2009, *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks, citing a brief item posted by Tyler Cowen a few days earlier on the *Marginal Revolution* blog (<http://www.marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2009/07/mass-sterilization.html#comments> [last accessed on February 28, 2012]), wrote an article on "The Power of Posterity," in which he considered what would happen if *half* the world's population were sterilized as a result of a "freak solar event" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/28/opinion/28brooks.html?scp=1&sq=power%20of%20posterity&st=cse> [last accessed on February 28, 2012]). Although some of Brooks's speculations evoke, albeit rather stridently, some of the themes of James's novel (and of these lectures), the proviso that only half of the world's population becomes infertile leads him ultimately in a different direction. Neither Cowen nor Brooks cites *Children of Men*, although online reader comments responding to Cowen's blog post and to Brooks's column both note the connection.

character of a concern for the survival of our loved ones. Indeed, there would be no identifiable people at all who could serve as the focus of our concern, except, of course, insofar as the elimination of a human afterlife gave us reason to feel concern for ourselves and for others now alive, despite its having no implications whatsoever about our own mortality or theirs.

Of course, the infertility scenario would mean that many groups and traditions would die out sooner than they otherwise would have done, and this would presumably be a source of particularistic distress for those with group-based or traditional allegiances. Still, because the infertility scenario suppresses the influence of any particularistic concern for individuals, it is more effective than the original doomsday scenario in highlighting something that I think is evident despite the persistence of group-based particularistic responses. What is evident is that, for all the power of the particularistic elements in our reactions to the catastrophe scenarios we have been discussing, there is also another powerful element that is at work, namely, the impact that the imminent end of humanity as such would have on us.

8. What exactly that impact would be is of course a matter of speculation, as indeed are all of the other hypothetical reactions to imagined disasters that we have been discussing. The speculations of P.D. James and Alfonso Cuarón have no special authority, apart from the authority that comes from having reflected seriously about the topic and from wanting to create fictional portrayals that audiences would find plausible enough to compel their interest and attention. Their speculations differ from each other in certain respects, just as my speculations may differ from theirs and yours may differ from mine. Having

said that, however, I hope it will not strike you as outlandish when I add that, like them, I find it plausible to suppose that such a world would be a world characterized by widespread apathy, anomie, and despair; by the erosion of social institutions and social solidarity; by the deterioration of the physical environment; and by a pervasive loss of conviction about the value or point of many activities.

In James's version of the story, an authoritarian government in Britain has largely avoided the savage anarchy that prevails in other parts of the world, and it has achieved a measure of popular support by promising people "freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom from boredom" (97), though the last of these promises proves difficult to keep in the face of mounting indifference toward most previously attractive activities. This indifference extends not only to those activities with an obvious orientation toward the future but also to those, like sex, that offer immediate gratification and might therefore have seemed likely to retain their popularity in an infertile world, but which turn out not to be exempt from the growing apathy. The government, hoping that the infertility may yet prove temporary, has to encourage continued interest in sex through the establishment of "national porn shops" (7). Theo Faron, the Oxford don who serves as James's protagonist and sometimes narrator says, describing people's reactions once they became convinced that the infertility was irreversible, that suicide increased, and that "those who lived gave way to the almost universal negativism, what the French named *ennui universel*. It came upon us like an insidious disease; indeed, it was a disease, with its soon-familiar symptoms of lassitude, depression, ill-defined malaise, a readiness to give way to minor infections, a perpetual disabling headache" (9). The exceptions to this syndrome

are those who are protected “by a lack of imagination” or by an “egotism so powerful that no external catastrophe can prevail against it” (9). And although Theo himself continues to fight against the *ennui* by trying to take pleasure in books, music, food, wine, and nature, he finds that pleasure “now comes so rarely and, when it does, is...indistinguishable from pain” (9). “Without the hope of posterity,” he says, “for our race if not for ourselves, without the assurance that we being dead yet live, all pleasures of the mind and senses sometimes seem to me no more than pathetic and crumbling defences shored up against our ruins” (9).

To the extent that all of this is persuasive, it suggests a significant increase in the range of activities whose perceived value might be threatened by the recognition that life on earth was about to come to an end. I have already noted several different types of activities that would be threatened by that prospect. First, there are some projects, such as cancer research or the development of new seismic safety techniques, which would be threatened because they have a goal-oriented character, and the goals they seek to achieve would straightforwardly be thwarted if the human race were imminently to disappear. Second, there are some projects, including creative projects of various kinds, which would be threatened because they tacitly depend for their perceived success on their reception by an imagined future audience, and the end of human life would mean the disappearance of audiences. Third, there are a large number of activities, including but not limited to those associated with participation in a tradition, which would be threatened because their point is in part to sustain certain values and practices over time, and the end of human life would mark the defeat of all such efforts. Fourth, and relatedly, there are activities that would be

threatened because they are aimed at promoting the survival and flourishing of particular national or communal groups, and those aims too would be doomed to frustration if human life were about to come to an end.

In addition, however, James's narrative encourages us to think that there are other, less obvious sorts of activities whose perceived value might also be threatened in an infertile world. It suggests, more specifically, that many activities whose rewards seem independent of those activities' contribution to any longer-term process or undertaking might nevertheless be vulnerable in this way. Even such things as the enjoyment of nature, the appreciation of literature, music, and the visual arts, the achievement of knowledge and understanding, and the appetitive pleasures of food, drink, and sex might be affected. This suggestion is likely to strike some people as implausible, and it may well be that individuals' attitudes toward these activities, if they were actually confronted with the infertility scenario, would be more variable and idiosyncratic than their attitudes toward activities in the other categories I have mentioned.

Still, I believe that James's speculations about the effects of the infertility scenario on people's attitudes toward these dimensions of human experience are suggestive. They give imaginative expression to the not implausible idea that the imminent disappearance of human life would exert a generally depressive effect on people's motivations and on their confidence in the value of their activities – that it would reduce their capacity for enthusiasm and for wholehearted and joyful activity across a very wide front. The same speculations also invite us to consider a slightly more specific possibility. We normally understand such things as the appreciation of literature and the arts, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the world around us, and the enjoyment of the appetitive

pleasures to be constituents of the good life. This means that we take a certain view about the place of these goods in a human life as a whole. But James's speculations invite us to consider the possibility that our conception of "a human life as a whole" relies on an implicit understanding of such a life as itself occupying a place in an ongoing human history, in a temporally extended chain of lives and generations. If this is so, then, perhaps, we cannot simply take it for granted that the activity of, say, reading *The Catcher in the Rye* or trying to understand quantum mechanics or even eating an excellent meal would have the same significance for people, or offer them the same rewards, in a world that was known to be deprived of a human future. We cannot assume that we know what the constituents of a good life would be in such a world, nor can we even be confident that there is something that we would be prepared to count as a good life.

9. For my purposes, however, it is not necessary that all of the details of James's version of the story should be found convincing, nor is it necessary to arrive at a settled conclusion about the exact range of activities whose perceived value would be eroded in an infertile world. All that is necessary is to suppose that, in such a world, people would lose confidence in the value of many sorts of activities, would cease to see reason to engage in many familiar sorts of pursuits, and would become emotionally detached from many of those activities and pursuits. As I have said, this seems plausible to me, and I hope that it will seem plausible to you too. So let me just stipulate that this assumption – which I will call "the afterlife conjecture" – is true. I take the afterlife conjecture to have implications of a number of different kinds. Perhaps the most striking of these

has to do with nature and limits of our egoism. We are all rightly impressed by the power and extent of our self-concern, and even the most ardent defenders of morality feel the need to argue for what Thomas Nagel called “the possibility of altruism”<sup>10</sup> in the face of the more-or-less universal assumption that our default motivations are powerfully self-interested. But consider this. Every single person now alive will be dead in the not-too-distant future. This fact is universally accepted and is not seen as remarkable, still less as an impending catastrophe. There are no crisis meetings of world leaders to consider what to do about it, no outbreaks of mass hysteria, no outpourings of grief, no demands for action. This does not mean that individuals do not fear their own deaths. To the contrary, many people are terrified of death and wish desperately to survive for as long as possible. Despite this, neither the recognition of their own mortality nor the prospect that everyone now alive will soon die leads most people to conclude that few of their worldly activities are important or worth pursuing. Of course, many people do find themselves, through bad luck or lack of opportunity, to be engaged in activities that do not seem to them worthwhile. Similarly, many individuals do at some point in their lives experience episodes of depression or despair, and the tragedy of suicide remains an all too common occurrence. But relatively little of this, I venture to say, is explained by reference to the impact on people of the recognition that all of the earth’s current inhabitants will someday die. Not only is that fact not regarded as a catastrophe, it is not even on anybody’s list of the major problems facing the world.

You may be tempted to say that it is not seen as a major problem because it is known to be inevitable. People have accepted the fact that everyone now

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

alive will die and that nothing can be done about it. Yet in the infertile world, the disappearance of the human race is also widely understood to be inevitable, but it *is* regarded as a catastrophe. In James's vivid depiction, it is regarded as a catastrophe whose prospect precipitates an unprecedented global crisis and exerts a profoundly depressive effect on many familiar human motivations. And if, as the afterlife conjecture supposes, at least the core of this depiction is accurate, the implication seems clear. In certain concrete functional and motivational respects, the fact that we and everyone we love will cease to exist matters less to us than would the non-existence of future people whom we do not know and who, indeed, have no determinate identities. Or to put it more positively, the coming into existence of people we do not know and love matters more to us than our own survival and the survival of the people we do know and love. Even allowing for the likelihood that some portion of our concern for these future people is a concern for the survival of particular groups with which we specially identify, this is a remarkable fact which should get more attention than it does in thinking about the nature and limits of our personal egoism.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Here it seems worth mentioning Dan Moller's interesting argument to the effect that the participants in loving relationships have much less importance for one another than we normally suppose. Moller bases his argument on empirical findings which suggest that the participants in such relationships are surprisingly resilient in the face of the loss of a partner or spouse. There is a superficial similarity between Moller's claim about the relative unimportance that spouses and partners have for one another and my claim that, in some respects, our own survival and the survival of the people we love matters less to us than does the existence of future people. Yet the two claims are in fact quite different. Moller's concern is with our reactions to actual losses while mine is with our reactions to prospective losses. Since we can have no reactions at all to our own actual deaths, Moller focuses exclusively on our reactions to the deaths of other people one loves, whereas I am concerned with the prospective loss not only of one's loved ones but also of one's own life. And whereas my point is that the relevant prospective reactions reveal some limits of our egoism, he takes our reactions to actual losses as evidencing a kind of emotional shallowness – a

It may seem that this is too hasty a conclusion to draw. Although people in the infertility scenario do come to view the disappearance of the human race as inevitable, this involves a change in their expectations. As I have described the scenario, most of these people begin life thinking that humanity will endure, and learn only later that it will not. So the infertility scenario involves a drastic change of expectations for them. By contrast, we all grow up understanding that we will someday die, and we have formed our expectations accordingly. Perhaps the differing responses to which I have called attention are evidence not of the limits of our egoism but merely of the power of disappointed expectations. If people had grown up knowing that they were the last generation of humans, perhaps this would have no greater impact on them than the prospect of our own deaths does on us. But I find this difficult to believe. I agree, of course, that the change in expectations might itself have a dramatic effect on people's attitudes. It would surely have a dramatic effect on our attitudes if we grew up thinking that we were immortal and discovered our own mortality only in middle age. But I do not think that those who grew up knowing that they were the last generation of human beings would be exempt from the phenomena that I have described. To me it seems implausible that the effect of this grim piece of knowledge would be to support their confidence in the value of their activities. It seems at least as plausible that, in contrast to those who discovered only later in life that they were the last generation, those who grew up with this understanding would simply lack such confidence from the outset.

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failure to register the true value of our loved ones and our relationships with them – which we have reason to regret. See Dan Moller, "Love and Death," *Journal of Philosophy* 104(2007): 301-316.

It may be objected that there is another, simpler explanation for the differing responses to which I have called attention, and this explanation also does not support any conclusions about the limits of our egoism. The fact that everyone now alive will soon die is not regarded as a catastrophe, and does not precipitate a global crisis, because it poses no threat to society itself. By contrast, the infertility scenario would mean the end of society, and so of course it would be viewed as catastrophic. This fact is unremarkable and shows nothing one way or another about the extent of our egoism. But this objection misses the point. It is true that the infertility scenario would mean the end of society, and it is not wrong to say that that is why it would be regarded as a catastrophe. However, under the terms of that scenario, “the end of society” would neither cause nor result from any change in the mortality or longevity of anyone now alive. From the perspective of those now living, the only difference between the infertility scenario and the mundane circumstance that everyone now living will soon die is that, in the infertility scenario, it is also true that no as yet unborn people will come into existence. So in finding that scenario but not the mundane prospect of universal death catastrophic, one is evincing a level of concern about the nonexistence of future people that exceeds one’s concern about the mortality of existing people. Characterizing this heightened level of concern as a concern about “the end of society” doesn’t change this fact. It merely redescribes it. And however one describes it, it continues to suggest some striking limits to our personal egoism.

A different kind of objection would be to concede that our reaction to the infertility scenario evinces concern about the nonexistence of future people, but to argue that this concern can itself be explained as a manifestation of, rather

than a departure from, our egoism. For the youngest among us, it may be said, the infertility scenario implies that there would be nobody alive to support or care for them when they became old. In the final years of their lives, there would effectively be no economy; no goods would be produced nor services provided. As the last generation of humans on earth, they would have no successors to provide the emotional, material, or medical support that they would require. So the infertility scenario would be, from a purely self-interested point of view, a disaster for them, and it would also alter for the worse their relations with other living generations. It might, for example, make them less willing to provide support for their own elders, and those elders might in turn be less willing to provide support for *their* elders, and so on. The result would be a ripple effect in which the disastrous implications for the youngest people would be passed up the generational ladder and would ultimately include everyone in society. In consequence, the infertility scenario might well be viewed as catastrophic by all of those now living, but only for instrumental, self-interested reasons.

This objection clearly has some merit, but I do not believe that it is the whole story. If it were, it would imply that, provided that the comfort of the youngest generation in their final years could be assured (perhaps by providing with them with thoughtfully pre-programmed caregiver robots<sup>12</sup>), then they, and by implication the rest of the living, could contemplate the imminent end of

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<sup>12</sup> When I first wrote this, I thought that I was describing something purely in the realm of science fiction, but that turns out not to be true. See, for example, "Toyota Sees Robotic Nurses in Your Lonely Final Years," <http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2010/01/toyota-sees-robotic-nurses-in-your-lonely-final-years/> (last accessed on February 28, 2012), and, in the same vein, "A Glimpse of the Future: Robots Aid Japan's Elderly Residents," [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/robotics/2009-11-04-japan-robots\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/robotics/2009-11-04-japan-robots_N.htm) (last accessed on February 28, 2012).

human life on earth with equanimity, or at least with no less equanimity than that with which people now contemplate their own deaths. But this strikes me as incredible. To me it seems clear, as I hope it will to you, that the infertility scenario would be viewed as catastrophic even if it were known in advance that it would not have any negative effect on either the physical comfort or the longevity of any living person.<sup>13</sup> That, at any rate, is what the afterlife conjecture

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<sup>13</sup> Is it the survival of human beings that matters to us or the survival of people (persons)? In the text I treat the two ideas as equivalent, but many philosophers suppose that, in principle, there might be members of non-human species who qualified as persons. Suppose we knew that the disappearance of human beings was imminent but that it would be accompanied by the sudden emergence on earth of a new species of non-human person. Would that be sufficient to restore our confidence in the value of our activities? If so, then perhaps it is the existence of people rather than the existence of human beings that matters to us. If not, then perhaps it is the survival of human beings in particular that we care about. But perhaps it is neither of these things. Perhaps what matters is the survival of people who share our values and seek to perpetuate our traditions and ways of life. If so, then the survival of human beings is neither necessary nor sufficient. Non-human persons with our values might do just as well. And human beings without our values would not help.

To the extent that these are questions about how we would react in various highly counterfactual circumstances, they are empirical questions that are extremely difficult to answer. My own view, as should be clear from the text, is that most of us do hope that future generations will share our most important values, but that the survival of humanity also matters to us in a way that is not exhausted by this concern. It is important to us that human beings should survive even though we know that their values and cultures will change in ways that we cannot anticipate and some of which we would not welcome. The future existence of non-human persons might provide some consolation if human beings did not survive, though a lot would depend on what exactly this new species was like and how its history was related to ours. In any case, though, I doubt whether the emergence of the new species would seem to us just as good as the survival of our own. That is in part because, despite what the terminology might suggest, I doubt whether we would view the existence of these non-human persons as providing us with the basis for what I have called “a personalized relation to the future.” In short, what I take the arguments of these lectures to show is that the survival of human persons matters greatly to us, although it is not the only thing that matters to us, and although there are other imaginable things that might provide some consolation if we knew that human persons were about to disappear.

supposes. In the second lecture, I will explore some of the additional implications of this conjecture, which seem to me to be far-reaching.

## LECTURE II

1. The first topic I want to address in this lecture concerns the precise way in which what matters depends on what I have been calling “the afterlife”. We have seen that, without confidence that there will be such an afterlife – without confidence that others will live on after we ourselves have died – many of the things that now matter to us would cease to do so, or would come to matter to us less. This was evident from the original doomsday scenario, and the infertility scenario made it clear that the importance to us of the afterlife does not derive solely from a concern for the survival of our loved ones. But we can distinguish among three different theses about the way in which what matters depends on the afterlife. The first thesis, which is the one I have been defending, holds that what matters *to us* implicitly depends on *our confidence* in the existence of the afterlife. We may refer to this as the *attitudinal* dependency thesis, because it asserts the dependence of some of our attitudes on others of our attitudes. It asserts that if we lost confidence in the existence of the afterlife, then many of the things that now matter to us would come to matter to us less, in the sense that we would see less reason to engage with them, would become less emotionally invested in them, and would be less convinced of their value or worth.

However, this attitudinal dependence itself implies that these things would become less important *to us* partly because, without confidence in the afterlife, we would see them as less important or valuable *simpliciter*. And this suggests that we accept a second dependency thesis, namely, that their mattering *simpliciter* depends on the actual existence of the afterlife, and not merely on our confidence in it. If we ceased to see our activities as valuable because we became

convinced that there would be no afterlife, then the prospect of taking a drug that would induce a false belief in the existence of the afterlife would not, prospectively, convince us that the activities were about to become valuable again. For what we would believe, prior to taking the drug, was that those activities being valuable depends, not on our belief in the afterlife, but on the actual existence of the afterlife. To the extent that we would have these reactions, this confirms that we accept an *evaluative* dependency thesis, which asserts that things matter or are valuable *simpliciter* only if there is in fact an afterlife.

Moreover, if our valuing something consists partly in our belief that it is valuable *simpliciter*, and if we tacitly accept that something's being valuable *simpliciter* depends on the actual existence of the afterlife, then it seems to follow that we accept still another dependency thesis, according to which our valuing something, or its mattering *to us*, also depends in an important respect on the actual existence of the afterlife, and not merely on our confidence in it. Suppose that our activities ceased to matter to us because we believed that there would be no afterlife. Suppose now that an all-powerful being offered to make things matter to us again, in either of two ways. Either the being could restore both the existence of the afterlife and our fully-justified belief in it, or it could simply give us a drug that would induce in us a false belief in the afterlife. I take it that we would not regard these as equally good ways of making things matter to us. We might feel that, if we took the drug, then although our activities would in fact come to matter to us, we would be mistaken in valuing or attaching importance to them. There would not be good reasons for them to matter to us, and there would be good reasons for them not to. Perhaps we might even express the point by saying that, if we took the drug, then our activities would *seem* to matter

to us but they wouldn't *really* matter to us. To the extent that we would have these reactions, we appear to accept a *justificatory* dependency thesis, which holds that we are justified in attaching importance to things, or that there is good reason for them to matter to us, only if there is an afterlife.

So we can distinguish among three different dependency theses: attitudinal, evaluative, and justificatory. The afterlife conjecture, which asserts that people faced with the infertility scenario would lose confidence in the value of many of their activities, provides direct support for the truth of the attitudinal dependency thesis, but not for the evaluative or justificatory theses. Instead, by providing direct support for the truth of the attitudinal dependency thesis, it provides indirect support for the *ascription to us* of the evaluative and justificatory dependency theses. It suggests that we tacitly take things to matter, and take ourselves to be justified in attaching importance to things, only insofar as there is in fact an afterlife, and not merely insofar as we believe that there is.

This leaves open the possibility that the evaluative and justificatory theses are nevertheless false. It is possible that, although we would lose confidence in the value of our activities if we were confronted with the infertility scenario, we would be making a mistake in so doing. Our valuable activities would remain just as valuable even if the disappearance of humanity were imminent. To the extent that we thought otherwise when confronted with the scenario, we would be wrong. In fact, this doesn't seem to me like a very plausible thing to say with regard to goal-oriented projects like finding a cure for cancer or developing new techniques for improving seismic safety. It seems equally implausible as applied to projects aimed at ensuring the survival and flourishing of a particular community or tradition. With respect to other activities, I am less certain. I can

see some appeal in the suggestion that, for example, intellectual activities would continue to be just as valuable even if humanity's disappearance were imminent and even if, in such circumstances, many of us would lose confidence in the value of those activities. But I can also see some appeal in the contrary suggestion. Suppose that, when confronted with the infertility scenario, a historian were to lose confidence in the value of conducting his planned research on Bulgarian military history. Or suppose that a political philosopher were to lose confidence in the value of writing additional articles about the relation between liberty and equality or about the correct interpretation of John Rawls's difference principle. Rather than assuming that the historian and the philosopher would be making a mistake, we might instead conclude that their reactions teach us something unexpected about the importance of our activities. In reflecting on their anticipated loss of confidence, in other words, it is tempting to say that we *discover* something, namely, that, to a greater extent than we may have realized, the actual value of our activities depends on their place in an ongoing human history.

There are, however, exceptions to the patterns of dependency I have been describing. Not all of the things that matter to us are dependent on our confidence in the existence of the afterlife. Obvious exceptions might include such things as relief from extreme pain. Even in an infertile world, it seems plausible to suppose that it would be important to people to be free from severe pain and, if they were experiencing such pain, it would be important to them to have it end. It does not seem likely that the disappearance of the afterlife would make this matter less to them. Nor, similarly, does it seem likely that friendship and other close personal relations would cease to matter to people. Indeed, it

may seem that they would come to matter even more, although the issue is complicated. On the one hand, we would expect that personal relationships would provide a sense of solidarity in the face of the looming catastrophe and, for that reason, that they would be an especially important source of comfort and solace. On the other hand, friendships are normally nourished by the engagement of each of the participants with valued activities, interests, and pursuits outside of the friendship itself. The effects on any given friendship of a mutual loss of confidence in the value of many of the participants' other activities is difficult to predict. Moreover, friendship, like the other goods discussed earlier, is something that we normally think of as having a certain place in a human life as a whole. So if, as I have speculated, one effect of the infertility scenario would be to undermine our ideas about the shape and even the possibility of a good human life, then this might affect people's attitudes toward their friendships and their friends in ways that are also difficult to predict. Still, it seems plausible to suppose that friendships and other personal relationships would retain considerable importance for people in an infertile world.

A different kind of example has to do with the existence of the afterlife itself. It is an implication of the argument I have been developing that the afterlife would itself continue to matter to people in an infertile world. And the fact that there was to be no afterlife would matter greatly to them. After all, the whole premise of the infertility scenario is that the elimination of the afterlife would have profound effects on people's emotions, motivations, and understanding of their reasons, and this implies that the afterlife (and its elimination) would continue to matter very much to them. But if this is right, it constitutes an important exception to the idea that what matters to us or seems

important to us depends on our confidence in the existence of the afterlife. It shows that the importance to us of the afterlife does not itself depend on our confidence in the existence of the afterlife. Nor, it seems, does it depend on the actual existence of the afterlife. If we contemplate the prospect that there will be no afterlife, this will not lead us to conclude that the existence of the afterlife either does not or should not matter to us. In short, the afterlife matters to us whether there will be an afterlife or not.

Finally, let me mention an example of an altogether different kind. Consider the question of why, in ordinary circumstances, people play games? I have in mind games played by amateurs, for recreational purposes, with no prospect of monetary reward. And for simplicity let us focus on games that require relatively little in the way of special talents or skills. Part of the answer, it seems to me, is that games create what might be thought of as self-contained bubbles of significance. The rules of a game determine what matters or is important to the players within the context of the game. The players understand that the things that matter to them in the context of the game are of no importance to them outside that context. If I am playing Monopoly, then my ability to use some of my play money to put a little “hotel” on a square of the board that I am said to “own” may matter a lot to me, even though I know perfectly well that it has no context-independent significance for me at all. And things that are of great importance to me outside the context of the game are irrelevant within it. My attempts to buy an actual house in which to live may matter greatly to me, but they don’t even register as relevant in the Monopoly world. In that sense, games establish artificial contexts in which things that otherwise lack importance to the participants are taken by them to matter

greatly. To play the game is to inhabit this artificial context for a period of time, and to accept and internalize, at least temporarily, its conception of what is important and what matters.

It is an interesting question why people find it appealing to do this. Given that there are things that really matter to us, why do we find it enjoyable to enter an artificial context in which things that do not otherwise matter to us are treated as if they did? Of course, not everyone finds it enjoyable to play games. Some people actually have an aversion to doing so, and for some of those people the aversion may derive precisely from the fact that the contexts of value or importance established by games are artificial. In other words, it may derive from the fact that the participants are expected to act as if things that don't really matter to them do matter to them. Some people may find it uninteresting or even unpleasant to engage in this sort of pretense. Yet although some people have an aversion to playing games, many people find it enjoyable to do so, and this suggests that, for some, it can be pleasurable to inhabit an artificial context of value or importance precisely because of its artificiality. The pressure to do things that really matter, with all of the attendant difficulty, risk of failure, and uncertainty involved, can be burdensome. The stakes are high and the difficulties considerable. It can come as a relief to retreat into an artificial, rule-governed world in which, on the one hand, it is very clear what matters and, on the other hand, it is also clear that what matters in the game doesn't really matter. To put the point perhaps too crudely, it can come as a relief to pretend that things matter when they don't.

It seems evident – indeed, it seems like a comical understatement to

assert – that the things that matter to us in the context of a game are not dependent for their perceived significance on our confidence in the existence of the afterlife. To the extent that it matters to me in a game of Monopoly to put hotels on my properties, the news that the human race will soon die out does not seem to render that ambition pointless. In the relevant sense, it was already pointless. This marks an obvious contrast with the cases of relief from severe pain and the existence of the afterlife itself, both of which were also said to be examples of things whose importance to us is independent of our confidence that there will be an afterlife. In those cases, the independence seems to be a mark of how much the things in question matter to us, or of the way in which they matter to us, whereas in the case of games, it is a mark of how little they really matter to us.

Does this mean that, in the infertility scenario, people who had previously enjoyed playing games would continue to do so? Perhaps. That is what we might expect if it really is true that the prospective disappearance of the human race would not undermine the importance to players of what happens in games. However, although I do not pretend to know the answer to the question, and hope never to see it put to the test, there are considerations that tend the other way. The fact that, in ordinary circumstances, it can be enjoyable to inhabit artificial contexts of significance may depend on our taking for granted a wider context in which many things really do matter to us. If it is a relief to inhabit the artificial context, that is presumably because we perceive the normal, non-artificial context as having a burdensomely value-laden character. If we could no longer take that character for granted, and if instead our sense of what was really important to us was already under assault from the infertility scenario, then it is

at least unclear whether playing games – feigning significance – would continue to be appealing. Would it continue to be a relief to inhabit artificial contexts of significance when the genuine contexts were no longer available to us? Here two thoughts suggest themselves. The first thought is that, if the answer to this question is no, then that may be because, although what matters to us within the context of a game is artificial, the fact that playing games itself matters to us is not similarly artificial. Instead, it matters to us because it gives us relief from the burdensome quest for genuine importance, and it is genuinely and non-artificially important to us to get such relief. In other words, the very pointlessness of playing games is the point of them. But this point itself might be dependent on the existence of the afterlife and so it might be undermined by the infertility scenario. It might no longer seem important to us to seek relief from importance, when there was so little importance available in the first place. The second thought is that, if the answer to the question is instead yes, then that may be because games would serve a different kind of function for people in the infertile world. Rather than enjoying the relief that artificial contexts of significance provide from the burdensome quest for real significance, people might enjoy the feigned significance of games because there was so little of genuine significance to be found, and feigned significance turned out to provide an acceptable simulacrum. In much the same way, P.D. James imagines the people in her infertile world lavishing attention on dolls and pets because there are no longer any human babies available.

2. The next topic I want to address has to do with the limits of our individualism. This is related to the point about the limits of egoism that I have

already discussed, but it is nevertheless distinct. The point about egoism had to do with the relative psychological power of our self-interested concerns in comparison with other sorts of motives and attitudes. In speaking now about the limits of individualism, I am interested instead in what the afterlife conjecture reveals about the extent to which individual valuing is, as a conceptual matter, part of a social or collective enterprise or practice. We all know that individuals differ in what they value and what is important to them. The distinctiveness of individuals is partly constituted by the distinctiveness of their personal values and commitments. Moreover, while some individuals have values and commitments with a strong and explicit social orientation, other people do not. They value more solitary pursuits and are less moved either to enter into collaborative ventures or to seek out projects whose explicit purpose is to make some kind of contribution to society. Notwithstanding these variations, however, the afterlife conjecture strongly suggests that much individual valuing, whether or not it has overtly social content or an overtly social orientation, nevertheless has at least an implicit social or collective dimension.

More generally, the entire range of phenomena that consists in people's valuing things, in things mattering or being important to them, or in their caring deeply about them, occurs within the implicit framework of a set of assumptions that includes, at the most basic level, the assumption that human life itself matters, and that it is an ongoing phenomenon with a history that transcends the history of any individual. Our concerns and commitments, our values and judgments of importance, our sense of what matters and what is worth doing – all of these things are formed and sustained against a background in which it is taken for granted that human life is itself a thriving, ongoing enterprise. Many of

our deepest and most defining values and aspirations and ambitions, for all of their felt urgency and for all of their associated aura of ultimate or bedrock importance, nevertheless depend on our taking this for granted. In fact, we take it so much for granted that we seldom recognize its role, let alone make it the explicit object of reflection. But this does nothing to diminish its significance. Humanity itself as an ongoing historical project provides the implicit frame of reference for most of our judgments about what matters. Remove that frame of reference, and our sense of importance – however individualistic it may be in its overt content – is destabilized and begins to erode. We need humanity to have a future if many of our own individual purposes are to matter to us now. Indeed, I believe that something stronger is true: we need humanity to have a future for the very idea that things *matter* to retain a secure place in our conceptual repertoire.

3. The third topic I want to address concerns the relation between value and temporality. I have already called attention to the conservative aspect of valuing, to the fact that there is something approaching a conceptual connection between valuing something and seeing reasons to preserve or sustain it over time. Perhaps there are cases in which someone genuinely values a thing but is indifferent to whether it survives past the moment, but if so these must surely be very special cases. So this is one respect in which valuing has a temporal dimension: to value X is normally to see reasons for trying to preserve or extend X over time. The fact that what matters to us implicitly depends on our confidence in the existence of an afterlife constitutes a second connection between value and temporality: what matters to us now depends on what we

think will happen later. Underlying both of these points, however, is a more general one. Valuing is a diachronic phenomenon in the sense that, in valuing something, one does not merely manifest an occurrent preference about how things go in the future. Instead, one acquires a *stake in* how things go, in whether what one values is realized or achieved or sustained. This is partly a consequence of the fact that valuing any X involves seeing oneself as having X-related reasons for action that extend over time and whose content depends on how X itself fares. And it is partly a consequence of the fact that valuing a thing also involves being emotionally vulnerable to how X fares. When we value something, then, we project ourselves into the future and invest ourselves in that future. Our emotions and our future courses of action both hang in the balance; they both depend on the fate of what we value. In this respect, valuing is both risky and proprietary. It is risky because, in valuing, we give hostages to fortune. If we valued nothing, then the prospect of post-mortem asteroids or global infertility would lack the power to disturb us in the way that they do. And it is proprietary because, in valuing, we lay claim to the future – we arrogate to ourselves the authority to make judgments about how the future *should* unfold. In a sense, valuing is a way of trying to control time. It is an attempt to impose a set of standards on time, and to make it answerable to us. To value something is to resist the transitoriness of time; it is to insist that the passage of time lacks normative authority. Things may come and things may go, but *we* decide what matters. *Man* is the measure of all things; Protagoras's dictum, understood in this way, sounds a defiant, even hubristic note. Time does not have the last word; it does not tell us what is important.

The fact that valuing is a diachronic phenomenon also enables it to play a stabilizing role in our lives. Our values express our own understanding of ourselves as temporally extended creatures with commitments that endure through the flux of daily experience. Our ordinary desires may and often do persist over time, even over very long periods of time. But to be committed to the persistence of our values is part of what it is for them to be our values (although, needless to say, they may change anyway). And a life lived without any values whatsoever would scarcely be recognizable as a human life at all. It would be more like the life of what Harry Frankfurt calls a “wanton.”<sup>14</sup> A wanton, according to Frankfurt, is an agent who is not a person because his actions simply “reflect the economy of his first-order desires,”<sup>15</sup> and because he is indifferent to “the enterprise of evaluating”<sup>16</sup> those desires.

4. Before moving on to my next topic, I want to take a brief detour to discuss the views of Alvy Singer. Alvy Singer, as you may remember, is the character played by Woody Allen in his movie Annie Hall. The movie contains a flashback scene in which the nine-year old Alvy is taken by his mother to see a doctor. Alvy is refusing to do his homework on the ground that the universe is expanding. He explains that “the universe is everything, and if it’s expanding,

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<sup>14</sup> See Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68(1971): 5-20.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

someday it will break apart and that would be the end of everything!”<sup>17</sup> Leaving aside Alvy’s nerdy precocity, the scene is funny because the eventual end of the universe is so temporally remote – it won’t happen for “billions of years,” the doctor assures Alvy – that it seems comical to cite it as a reason for not doing one’s homework. But if the universe were going to end soon after the end of his own natural life, then the arguments I have been rehearsing imply that Alvy might have a point. It might well be a serious question whether he still had reason to do his homework. Why should there be this discrepancy? If the end of human life in the near term would make many things matter less to us now, then why aren’t we similarly affected by the knowledge that human life will end in the longer term? The nagging sense that perhaps we should be is also part of what makes Alvy’s refusal to do his homework funny.

Yet I take it as a datum that, in general, and allowing for occasional episodes of Alvy-like angst, we are not so affected. We do not feel or behave as we would, for example, in the infertile world. What we require to maintain our equanimity, it seems, is not that humanity should be immortal, but merely that it should survive for a healthy and indefinitely long period after our own deaths. I don’t think that we would object to immortality – even Bernard Williams, who thought that personal immortality would be tedious, made no such claim about the immortality of the species<sup>18 19</sup> – but we don’t insist on it. I’m not sure that we

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<sup>17</sup> *Annie Hall*, screenplay by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman, available online at [http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/annie\\_hall.html](http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/annie_hall.html) (last accessed on February 28, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> See Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 82-100. Nor, incidentally, is such a claim attributable to Leoš Janáček, whose opera *The Makropulos Case* was one of the inspirations for Williams’s

can be said exactly to have a *reason* for this, though I'm open to suggestions. My speculation instead is that we simply don't know how, in these contexts, to work with or even fully to grasp concepts like 'the end of the universe' or 'billions of years'. Those ideas require us to adopt a conceptual and spatiotemporal perspective whose vast scale is difficult to align with the much more restricted frame of reference relative to which we make judgments of significance in our daily lives. The result is that we are simply confounded when we try to integrate such ideas into our thinking about what matters. It's not so much that we are not troubled, or cannot be talked into being troubled, about what will happen in the extremely remote future, it's just that we don't really know how to think about it at all, in part because there are so few contexts in which we have occasion to do so.

5. I have, by stipulation, been using the term 'afterlife' to refer to the continued existence of other people after one's own death. I want now to consider the relation between the afterlife in my sense and the afterlife as it is

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article. This much seems clear, for example, from the final scene ("The Forester's Farewell") of another Janáček opera, *The Cunning Little Vixen* – a scene that was performed at the composer's funeral and which Williams himself greatly admired. (An English translation of the libretto for that opera can be found in Timothy Cheek, *The Janáček Opera Libretti: Volume I* [Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2003], pp. 172-181. Williams mentions the final scene in "Janáček's Modernism: Doing More with Less in Music and Philosophy," which is included in his *On Opera* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006]: pp. 118-120.)

<sup>19</sup> In "On Becoming Extinct" (*Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 83[2002]: 253-269), James Lenman argues that, given that human beings will someday become extinct, it makes no difference from an impersonal perspective whether this happens sooner or later. However, he also holds that we have good (although defeasible) "generation-centred reasons" for preferring that it happen later rather than sooner. And he does not argue for the desirability of human extinction from either the impersonal or the "generation-centred" perspective.

more commonly understood. Apart from my insistence on using the same word in both cases, and apart from the fact that both ideas involve the continued existence of *someone* after one's death, are there any interesting connections between the two notions? In discussing this question, I will, for the sake of convenience, sometimes refer to the afterlife as it is traditionally understood as "the personal afterlife" and the afterlife in my non-standard sense as "the collective afterlife." These bits of usage are also stipulative.

One way to begin is by considering the relationship between the ways in which the collective afterlife matters to people and the ways in which the personal afterlife matters to people. It is clear that most people who believe in the existence of the afterlife as it is commonly understood – in the personal afterlife – attach great importance to it. What features are responsible for its perceived importance? There is no simple answer to this question, in part because the idea of "the afterlife as commonly understood" is an oversimplification. Many religious and philosophical traditions have developed conceptions of the personal afterlife, and these conceptions differ from one another in significant respects. I have no hope of doing justice here either to the complexity of these various doctrines or to the differences among them. For my purposes, it will suffice to single out a few prominent features that have often been associated with ideas of the personal afterlife and to which many people have attached a great deal of importance.

The most obvious reason why the afterlife has mattered to people, and the one that I shall therefore say the least about, lies simply in the prospect of personal survival itself. Although I have argued that there are some significant respects in which the survival of others matters more to us than our own

survival, it is nevertheless clear that the desire for personal survival is, for many people, an extremely powerful one. Some philosophers, such as Williams, have argued that immortality would not be desirable,<sup>20</sup> and other philosophers have argued that death is neither to be regarded as a misfortune nor to be feared,<sup>21</sup> but it seems safe to say that many people remain unconvinced. As I have emphasized and as is in any case evident, many people find the prospect of death terrifying and are eager to prolong their lives for as long as possible.<sup>22</sup> If the prospect of a personal afterlife offered nothing more than relief from the fear of death and the prospect of personal survival, it would still be, for many people, overwhelmingly desirable. Without underestimating the appeal of these factors, however, it is important to recognize that the afterlife has mattered to people for other reasons as well.

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<sup>20</sup> See Williams, "The Makropulos Case," *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> The most famous examples are Epicurus, in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, and Lucretius, in *De Rerum Natura*. For a contemporary defense of the Epicurean position, see Stephen E. Rosenbaum, "How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23(1986): 217-25.

<sup>22</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, in a chapter titled "The Hunger for Immortality," gives memorable expression to these attitudes:

I am presented with arguments...to prove the absurdity of a belief in the immortality of the soul. But these ratiocinations do not move me, for they are reasons and no more than reasons, and one does not feed the heart with reasons. I do not want to die. No! I do not want to die, and I do not want to want to die. I want to live always, forever and ever. And I want to live, this poor I which I am, the I which I feel myself to be here and now, and for that reason I am tormented by the problem of the duration of my soul, of my own soul.

I am the center of my Universe, the center of the Universe, and in my extreme anguish I cry, along with Michelet, "My I! They are stealing my I!"

-- Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, translated by Anthony Kerrigan, edited and annotated by Martin Nozick and Anthony Kerrigan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 51.

One very important reason is that it has been regarded as an opportunity to be reunited with loved ones: both with those who died while one was still alive and with those who remained alive after one died. I take it that the desire for this kind of reunion is, along with the desire to avoid death itself, one of the most powerful unsatisfiable desires that human beings have. Even the less ambitious desire simply to be able to communicate with those who have died can be almost unbearably intense. If you have ever had occasion to read *The New York Times's* Death Notices, you may have seen the brief "In Memoriam" section at the end, in which people address messages directly to deceased loved ones, usually on their birthdays or the anniversaries of their deaths. Although I completely understand the desire to communicate with those who have departed, I was for some time puzzled by people's confidence that their loved ones continued to read *The New York Times*. On reflection, however, it has come to seem to me that the impulse to broadcast these sometimes painfully intimate messages in a public forum is actually a rather ingenious way of trying to subvert the impossibility of successful communication with the dead. Roughly speaking, the publicity masks the impossibility, although why exactly this should be so is a fascinating question that would repay further investigation. To pursue the matter further here, however, would lead us too far astray, and so I will content myself with simply citing this phenomenon as evidence of the intensity with which people long to communicate or to be reunited with the dead. It is clear that one reason why the personal afterlife matters so much to people is that it offers the prospect of satisfying this longing.

A third reason – or set of reasons – has to do with ideas of redemption, vindication, and justice. The personal afterlife as it has traditionally been

conceived offers the prospect that the worst deficiencies of this world will somehow be made good in the next. Those who have prospered by treating others cruelly or unjustly will be held to account. Those who have been victimized or oppressed will receive recognition, reward, or recompense. Those who have endured pain, poverty, and loss will at last be granted comfort and relief. The sufferings of the innocent and the triumphs of the vicious, so hard to endure or to accept in this world, will be set in a wider context that makes sense of them and reveals them to have served some purpose that redeems them. They will be explained in ways that we will be able to understand and accept. We will at last be able to see why these things happened, and the explanation will prove satisfying; it will put us in a position to reconcile ourselves to the intolerable cruelties of life on earth. In short, the manifest injustices of this world will be superseded by the cosmic justice of the next. The incomprehensible unfairness of life as we know it will turn out not to have been the final word in human affairs. We will get what we all want: some answers, and some justice. And apart from the desire for personal survival and the desire to be reunited with loved ones, these are perhaps the most powerful human longings to which traditional ideas of the afterlife have spoken: the longing for understanding and the longing for justice.

This leads more or less directly to a fourth reason why the personal afterlife has seemed important to people. If there is no afterlife, and if the injustices of this world are indeed the final word in human affairs, then our worldly lives may seem devoid of purpose, and nothing at all may seem ultimately to matter. Nothing will ever redeem the sufferings of the innocent or undo the triumphs of the wicked. The universe does not care whether the

innocent suffer or the wicked prosper, because the universe doesn't care about anything. And if the universe doesn't care then our own caring may seem pointless, because the fact that the universe doesn't care means that nothing really matters in the end. There is no cosmic ledger in which scores are kept and eventually settled. Things just happen, and then they stop happening. There is no cosmic justice, there is no cosmic purpose, and there is nothing at all that ultimately matters. So it really doesn't matter what we do now. We may be kind or cruel, wise or foolish, brilliantly successful or dismally unsuccessful, but it really doesn't matter. None of it is of any ultimate importance, because the idea that anything at all is of ultimate importance is just an illusion. Or, at any rate, that is the nihilistic conclusion that some people have thought we would have to draw if there were no personal afterlife. To these people, it has seemed essential that there should be an afterlife if our worldly lives are to have the kind of purpose or point that would vindicate our ordinary human concerns and aspirations. So understood, the personal afterlife speaks to the deep human desire that our worldly existence should have some ultimate meaning or purpose or significance.

In summary, then, the personal afterlife has seemed important to people for (at least) the following reasons. It has seemed to offer them the prospect of personal survival, of relief from the fear of death, of being reunited with their loved ones, of seeing cosmic justice done, of receiving a satisfying explanation for some of life's most troubling features, and of gaining assurance that their lives have some larger purpose or significance. Now if you are a suspicious person, you may at this point have begun to wonder whether I am going to try to pull a cosmic rabbit out of my humble, professorial hat, and to demonstrate that the

collective afterlife can actually deliver on suitably reinterpreted versions of all of these promises. Alas, no such wizardry is in the offing. As far as I can see, no amount of reinterpetive gymnastics will yield any interesting sense in which the fact that others will live on after we have died means that we ourselves can reasonably hope for personal survival after death, or for communication or reunion with our loved ones, or for cosmic justice, or for a satisfying explanation of why the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper. The question of whether the existence of the collective afterlife can vindicate our worldly concerns and help to stave off nihilism is obviously more complicated. It is, in effect, one of the main issues I have been discussing in these lectures, and I will return to it in a moment, but even an affirmative answer would not mean that our lives have some larger cosmic purpose or significance, at least so far as I understand those notions.

My primary interest, however, is not in whether our hopes for the afterlife can be satisfied, but rather in what those hopes and desires can teach us about ourselves and our values. And here I think that, up to a point, a comparison of people's attitudes toward the personal afterlife and their attitudes toward the collective afterlife reveals some interesting common ground. One thing that is striking about the reasons why people have attached importance to the personal afterlife is that those reasons have some of the same non-egoistic and non-individualistic character that we noted earlier in discussing our attitudes toward the collective afterlife. This is all the more noteworthy because we might naturally have been inclined to assume that, in view of the importance that people attach to personal survival and relief from the fear of death, the afterlife matters to them exclusively because of what it seems to offer on these fronts.

However, while these things certainly do matter to people, the considerations I have canvassed suggest another side to the story.

They suggest that people's attitudes toward the personal afterlife also reflect, among other things, two particularly profound desires. The first is the desire to be able to preserve or reclaim one's place in a web of valued social relationships. The second is the desire to be able to live in a just and orderly world, one in which the values of justice and fairness prevail. To the extent that they reflect these desires, people's attitudes toward the personal afterlife reinforce a conclusion that we drew when considering our attitudes toward the collective afterlife: namely, that as much as we may wish for personal survival, we also wish for the survival and flourishing of our social world. Indeed, as they manifest themselves in this case, these two wishes are not sharply separable, for even when people's fantasies of the personal afterlife focus primarily on their own survival and flourishing, they do not normally imagine that they will flourish while living in isolation from the people they care about. On the contrary, they imagine that their relationships with those people will be restored and extended, and it is not clear how much appeal the prospect of a completely solitary afterlife would have for them. Nor do they suppose that their own eternal flourishing will be a piece of exceptional good fortune, and that, in general, the next world will be just as full of cruelty and unfairness as this one. Instead, they implicitly take their own eternal flourishing to consist in living among those they love as part of a just and fair order. And the fact that that is their fantasy of the next world tells us something about what matters to them in this one. It also confirms the non-individualistic character of human valuing,

and shows that the limits of individualism apply not only to those who do not believe in the personal afterlife but also to those who do.

Yet, when thinking about the relation between people's attitudes toward the personal afterlife and their attitudes toward the collective afterlife, the most interesting comparison concerns the role of each in underwriting the purpose or significance of our ordinary, worldly lives. As I said, it has seemed to many people as if, in the absence of a personal afterlife, nothing would ultimately matter, and so it would not matter what we do now. Our lives would be devoid of meaning or purpose. Similarly, in discussing the collective afterlife, we noted that, if we became convinced that human beings would soon disappear from the earth, then many of the things that now matter to us would seem to us to matter less, or not to matter at all. This suggests another point of common ground in our attitudes toward the personal and collective afterlives. Notwithstanding this common ground, however, I believe that there are important and revealing differences between the two sets of attitudes. Although many people sincerely believe that life would lose its purpose and that our ordinary concerns would cease to matter in the absence of a personal afterlife, the evidence nevertheless suggests that most people who do not believe in a personal afterlife are able to carry on quite nicely.

In other words, there are many people who do not believe in the existence of a personal afterlife but for whom the full range of human activities, projects, and relationships continues to matter greatly. Their lack of confidence in the existence of a personal afterlife does not in any way diminish their tendency to invest activities and events with significance. They continue to regard projects and pursuits of many different kinds as valuable and to see themselves as having

compelling reasons to undertake those projects and engage in those pursuits. They seek out and become involved in personal relationships that they value deeply, and they recognize and act on the distinctive reasons that arise in the context of such relationships. In pursuing their projects and relationships, moreover, they routinely place themselves in positions where they are vulnerable to a wide range of emotions depending on how those projects and relationships fare. In short, they do not behave like people to whom little or nothing matters or has any importance. Despite their complete lack of conviction about the existence of a personal afterlife, they continue to lead value-laden lives: lives structured by whole-hearted engagement in a full array of valued activities and interactions with others.

All of this stands in marked contrast to our speculations about how people would behave when faced with a loss of confidence in the collective afterlife. Our primary conjecture about the infertility scenario was that, in an infertile world, people would cease to believe in the value of many sorts of activities that they had previously regarded as worthwhile. In addition, they would cease to see themselves as having reason to engage in many familiar sorts of pursuits that they had previously treated as reason-giving. And activities that they had previously engaged in eagerly and wholeheartedly would now elicit a measure of apathy or indifference. In view of these doxastic, deliberative, and emotional changes, people's ability to lead value-laden lives would be seriously eroded.

If these speculations are even roughly accurate, they point to a dramatic conclusion. Although one of the primary reasons why the personal afterlife matters to people is that it offers the prospect of personal survival, and although many people desperately wish to survive for as long as possible, a failure to

believe in the existence of the personal afterlife is actually much less likely to erode people's confidence in the value or importance of their worldly pursuits than is a failure to believe in the existence of the collective afterlife, which offers no prospect of personal survival. It is much less likely to lead people to think, to reason, to feel, and to act as if little or nothing was important to them. In these concrete respects, the collective afterlife matters more to people than the personal afterlife. In other words, our confidence that there will be a collective afterlife is, to a much greater extent than our confidence that there will be a personal afterlife, a condition of other things mattering to us here and now.

So we have arrived at the same conclusion that we reached in Lecture I from a different starting point. In some very basic respects, our own survival, and even the survival of those we love and care about most deeply, matters less to us than the survival of strangers, the survival of humanity itself. Just to be clear, let me distinguish this conclusion from some other conclusions about survival that philosophers have drawn. Some philosophers have argued that, even if we reject traditional conceptions of the personal afterlife, there is nevertheless an important sense in which at least some of us *can* hope to survive our own deaths, so the personal afterlife, understood in a certain way, is not entirely out of reach.<sup>23</sup> Other philosophers have argued, not that there is a personal afterlife, but rather that, if we understood what personal survival consists in, then it might come to matter to us less than it does and the survival of

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<sup>23</sup> See Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2010).

others might come to matter to us more.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, my argument has been that personal survival already *does* matter to us less than we tend to suppose, and that the survival of humanity matters to us more. In saying this, I am not underestimating our powerful impulses to personal survival or the deep terror that many people feel when contemplating their own deaths. Nor am I denying the importance of self-interested motivations in ordinary human behavior. My point is that, despite the power of these attitudes, there is a very specific sense in which our own survival is less important to us than the survival of the human race. The prospect of the imminent disappearance of the race poses a far greater threat to our ability to treat other things as mattering to us and, in so doing, it poses a far greater threat to our continued ability to lead value-laden lives.

6. One way to challenge this conclusion would be to argue as follows. What has been shown, it might be said, is that, for people who do not believe in a personal afterlife, the prospect of the imminent disappearance of the human race poses a greater threat to their ability to lead value-laden lives than does the prospect of their own deaths. But this comparative claim is not true of those who do believe in a personal afterlife. For them, the prospect of the disappearance of the race would be far less threatening, since they expect to survive their own deaths in any case. What the argument therefore demonstrates is only that, in order for one's capacity to lead a value-laden life to be secure, one must believe either in a personal or in a collective afterlife: either in one's own survival after one's death or in the survival of others.

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<sup>24</sup> See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 281-2.

As I said at the beginning of the first lecture, I am concerned primarily with the attitudes of people who do not believe in the personal afterlife. So the suggestion that the comparative claim applies only to them is not something I am committed to denying. But if indeed the comparative claim holds true only of them, this fact should itself strike us as remarkable. It should strike us as remarkable that people who do *not* believe they will survive their own deaths would nevertheless be more threatened by the prospect of the disappearance of the human race than by the prospect of their own deaths. We might have expected just the reverse to be true. Since these people do not expect to survive their own deaths, and since many of them want desperately to survive, we might have supposed that the prospect of their own deaths would be far more threatening to them than the prospect that humanity as a whole would die out. And we might have supposed that if the comparative claim were true of anyone, it would be true of those who *do* believe in the personal afterlife, and who therefore expect to survive their own deaths. We might have supposed that, because of these beliefs, this group of people would be less threatened by the prospect of their own deaths than by the prospect of the disappearance of humanity.

In fact, as this last point suggests, the question of whether the comparative claim applies to those who do believe in the personal afterlife is more complex than it may seem. After all, these people expect to survive their own deaths, and so, we may assume, the prospect of their own deaths poses no threat at all to their capacity to lead value-laden lives. Relative to that low baseline, the prospect of humanity's disappearance might well pose a greater threat. On the other hand, those who believe in a personal afterlife for themselves normally

believe that such an afterlife is available to others as well, so for these believers the end of human life on earth might also seem to pose little threat. In that case, the correct conclusion would be that neither the prospect of their own deaths nor the prospect of humanity's disappearance would pose much of a threat to their ability to lead value-laden lives. Yet this is a bit too quick, since the imminent disappearance of human life on earth would presumably lead even these believers to lose interest in a wide-range of future-oriented projects, such as the project of finding a cure for cancer, which would be rendered pointless under the terms of the infertility scenario. And it is not obvious how far-reaching these effects would be.

Still, it may be correct to assert, as the challenge we are considering does, that, in order for one's capacity to lead a value-laden life to be secure, one must believe in one form of afterlife or the other. One must believe either in the personal afterlife or in the collective afterlife. This claim, if true, is certainly significant. But it is significant for three reasons, all of which are congenial to the position I have been developing. First, it calls attention to one of the potential dangers of a belief in the personal afterlife, namely, that such a belief may reconcile people too readily to the disappearance of life on earth, and make it seem less urgent to prevent this from happening. Second, it reinforces the point made earlier about the limits of individualism. That is, it confirms the dependence of human valuing on our confidence that humanity has a future: whether that future is of the conventional kind represented by the collective afterlife or the very different kind represented by the personal afterlife. Finally, it emphasizes once again the unexpected character of the attitudes I have described. It is not, perhaps, surprising that a belief in the personal afterlife

should protect the believers' ability to lead value-laden lives in this world. What *is* surprising is that, for the rest of us, our ability to lead such lives would be more threatened by the prospect of humanity's disappearance than by the prospect of our own deaths, despite the fact that we neither want to die nor expect to survive our deaths.

Of course, the very fact that this conclusion is surprising may seem like a reason for doubting its truth. If it really were true that we were less concerned with our own survival than with the survival of humanity as a whole, how could we possibly be unaware of this? In addressing this question, it is important to keep in mind the limited scope of the conclusion I have drawn. I have not claimed that we are in general or in all contexts less concerned with our own survival than with the survival of humanity. What I have said is only that there is one important respect in which this is so. The point, again, is that our continuing to regard things as mattering to us in our worldly lives is more dependent on our confidence in the survival of humanity than it is on our confidence in our own survival.

If this comes as a surprise to us, that is partly because we generally take the collective afterlife for granted. This means that, fiction and philosophy aside, we never have occasion to experience or to confront the reactions we would have if the destruction of humanity were imminent. So the importance to us of the collective afterlife is masked or hidden from view. We don't recognize how much it matters to us. By contrast, we know perfectly well that we will die and we are intimately acquainted with our reactions to that fact. Given the power of these reactions and the central role that our attitudes toward our own deaths play in our lives, it seems preposterous to claim that we are actually more

concerned about the survival of humanity than we are about our own survival. But that is because we are making the wrong comparison. We are comparing our reactions to our own imminent annihilation, which we fully expect to happen, with our reactions to the survival of the human race, which we generally take for granted. However, the relevant comparison is between our actual reactions to our own imminent annihilation and the reactions we would have to the imminent annihilation of the human race, if we were as confident that it were about to occur as we are of our own deaths. And my claim is that, despite the dread and terror with which many people face the prospect of their own death, there is one extremely important respect in which many face that prospect with greater equanimity than they would exhibit if faced with the imminent disappearance of humanity itself. Things continue to matter to them even though they know they will die, and the prospect of their death does not exert the same depressive effect on their ability to live value-laden lives as would the prospective disappearance of humanity itself.

Despite what I have said, this may continue to seem surprising. If so, that is partly because we tend to believe our own bad press, and to overestimate the extent of our egoism. As I argued earlier, the fact that, in certain respects, we care less about our own survival than about the survival of humanity shows something important and insufficiently appreciated about the limits of our egoism. In part, our surprise when this is pointed out simply confirms the insufficiency of our appreciation. However, there is a distinction that needs to be drawn here. The assertion that we care less about own survival than about the survival of humanity might be understood in two different ways. It might be taken to mean that we are less motivated to ensure our own survival than we are

to ensure the survival of humanity. Or it might mean that we are more dependent for our equanimity on our confidence in the survival of humanity than on our confidence in our own survival. Although references to the limits of our egoism might suggest the first interpretation, it is the second interpretation that is supported by the arguments I have offered. The point has not been that we are more highly motivated to advance the interests of future generations, but rather that we are in certain ways more dependent on them. If we find this surprising, it is less because we have been blinded to our own altruism than because we have overestimated our independence and self-sufficiency. In one way, of course, it is no news that death marks the limits of our self-sufficiency. Death amounts to personal annihilation, and there is nothing we can do to avoid it no matter how much we want to and no matter how hard we try. But the considerations I have been rehearsing suggest a different kind of limit to our self-sufficiency. They reveal that we are vulnerable to catastrophe befalling the rest of humanity in a way that we are not vulnerable to our own deaths. And it is the extent of our vulnerability to others that we may find surprising, that may bring us up short.

Of course, if our vulnerability is as great as I have said it is, then perhaps we should be more highly motivated than we are to help ensure that humanity survives. We should be less egoistic in that sense too. The reasons that we have for attending to the interests of future generations are often conceptualized as obligations of justice or seen as grounded in our responsibilities to our descendants. This discourse of obligation and responsibility reinforces our tendency to think that the salient features of our relations to future generations are our power over them and their dependence on us. And it represents the

reasons we have for taking their interests into account as moral reasons which should override our concern for ourselves. But the considerations I have been advancing suggest that we also have reasons of a very different kind for attending to the interests of future generations, and that is simply because they matter so much to us. In certain respects, their survival matters more to us than our own. From this perspective, what is salient is not their dependence on us but rather our dependence on them. This is not to deny that they *are* causally dependent on us in obvious ways. But from the perspective I have sketched, their causal dependence on us, rather than being a source of burdensome obligations, provides us instead with welcome opportunities, for to the extent that the collective afterlife matters to us more than the personal afterlife, it is a stroke of good fortune that it is also more under our control. There are actually things we can do to promote the survival and flourishing of humanity after our deaths, such as taking action to solve the problems of climate change and nuclear proliferation, for example. By contrast, there is nothing at all that we can do to promote our own personal survival after our deaths. So perhaps if we recognize the extent of our dependence on future generations, then that will strengthen our determination to act in their behalf, and make us less egoistic in that sense too.

Having said this, however, I must now add that I think that the dichotomy I have drawn between two different ways in which we might be said to care more about the survival of humanity than about our own survival is too simple. It is too simple to say that we care more only in the sense that we are more dependent on the survival of humanity and not in the sense that we are more highly motivated to help ensure it. I think there are at least some contexts in which we would also be more highly motivated to ensure the survival of

humanity than we would be to ensure our own survival. Imagine, for example, that you are presented with a choice between two options. If you choose Option 1 rather than Option 2, then you will die sooner, but humanity will survive long after you are dead. If you choose Option 2 rather than Option 1, then you will live longer, but the rest of humanity will immediately perish and you will live out your remaining years as the only human being on earth. Which would you choose? I think that my own aversion to death is as strong as anyone's, but I would not hesitate to choose the first option, and I suspect that the same is true for many of you. If that is right, then the survival of humanity matters more to us than our own survival not merely in the sense that we are in certain ways more dependent on it but also in the sense that we would in certain contexts be more highly motivated to bring it about.

At least in my own case, however, it would be misleading to interpret these preferences as evidence of hitherto unsuspected reserves of altruism. To the extent that my reasons for preferring the first option to the second go beyond my recognition of the ways in which what matters to me now depends on the survival of others after my death, those reasons stem primarily from a conviction that to live in a world without other people would be to live in a world without value, a world in which nothing, or almost nothing, mattered. In fact, I would choose not to live on as the only human being on earth even if the alternative were not that human society would survive after my death but rather that everyone including me would die. What is most salient about this preference is what it reveals not about the limits of our egoism but about the equally unappreciated limits of our individualism. In other words, it reflects the strongly social character of human valuing: the extent to which the assumption of an

ongoing social life is an implicit pre-condition of our ability to lead what I have called value-laden lives. To the extent that we would prefer to die rather than to live on alone, what that tells us is that we do not see much prospect of living a worthwhile life in a world otherwise uninhabited by human beings.<sup>25</sup>

7. Life is too short but, as I'm sure you will agree, these lectures have gone on long enough. Let me bring them to a close by providing a brief summary of my main contentions. I have argued that the survival of people after our deaths matters greatly to us, both in its own right and because it is a condition of many other things that now matter to us continuing to do so. In some very significant respects, we actually care more about the survival of others after our deaths than we do about the existence of a personal afterlife, and the imminent disappearance of the human race would have a more corrosive effect on our ability to lead what I have called "value-laden lives" than does the actual prospect of our own deaths. These facts teach us something both about the limits of our egoism and about the limits of our individualism. They also help to illuminate some general features of human valuing. They highlight its conservative, nonexperiential, and nonconsequentialist dimensions. In addition, they shed light on the complex relations between value and temporality. Valuing is itself a diachronic or temporally extended phenomenon, and it is also

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<sup>25</sup> But consider, instead of the choice described in the text, the following variant, which was suggested to me by Niko Kolodny. If you choose Option 1, then once again you will die sooner, but humanity will survive long after you are dead. If you choose Option 2, however, then you will live to a ripe old age, but humanity will perish when you do. If you would choose Option 1 under these conditions, that cannot be because of an unwillingness to live as the only human being on earth.

one of the ways in which we try to exert some kind of control over time, to make time answerable to us rather than the reverse. Not surprisingly, time also figures more directly, and in more than one way, in our reactions to the afterlife scenarios that I discussed. Among other things, those reactions provide evidence of our desire to establish a personalized relation to the future in the face of our certain deaths, and one of the reasons why the survival of others after our deaths matters so much to us is that it is required if we are to succeed in doing this. Indeed, one of the reasons why the disappearance of the human race is such a terrible prospect for each of us is that it marks the ultimate defeat of all of our strategies, as individuals and in groups, for mastering time and its terrors. But it is also a terrible prospect because, to an extent that we rarely acknowledge, our conviction that things matter is sustained by our confidence that life will go on after we ourselves are gone. In this respect, as I have argued, the survival of humanity matters more to each of us than we usually realize; indeed, in this respect, it matters more to us even than our own survival.