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MEANINGFUL LIVES AND MEANINGFUL FUTURES

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WHAT MORAL REASONS, if any, do we have to prevent the extinction of humanity? Various answers to this question have been proposed in the literature. For example, we may have reasons grounded in the interests of the final generation: many ways in which we could become extinct would involve intense suffering, premature death, or despair from knowing that it all ends with us.[1] Other candidate reasons relate to the significance of the past: our disappearance would bring an end to many valuable cultural artefacts that might be worth preserving for their own sake.[2] Still other considerations are rooted in what lies ahead of us: there may be trillions of happy people in the future, and our demise would prevent them from coming into existence.[3] But none of these views has universal appeal.

In his 2023 article "Unfinished Business," Jonathan Knutzen proposes another, hitherto neglected reason to care about the continuation of our tenure:

> Roughly, the idea is that certain further developments in culture would be good, and that extinction would be bad insofar as, and because, it closes off the possibility of realizing these further developments.[4]

These "developments in culture" include progress on or completion of telic collective endeavors (i.e., those endeavors that involve definable goals and collaboration between people), such as the project of science. According to Knutzen, such developments would be "good" in the sense that they would be "collectively meaningful." The key innovation here is the idea that the goodness of a state of affairs is determined not only by values such as aggregate welfare or equality but also by its collective meaningfulness—a value that is a collective analogue (and not merely the aggregate) of the meaningfulness of individual

1 See Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*.

2 See Frick, "On the Survival of Humanity"; and Scheffler, *Why Worry About Future Generations?*

3 See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*; Bostrom, "Astronomical Waste"; Ord, *The Precipice*; and Greaves and MacAskill, "The Case for Strong Longtermism."

4 Knutzen, "Unfinished Business," 5 (hereafter cited parenthetically).

lives. Notably, this account is not meant to imply that our extinction would always be bad. If humanity had never engaged in the project of science or if we were to someday complete it, Knutzen suggests, these "meaning-based reasons" would not apply.

Knutzen frames his discussion as an attempt at an interpretation of a sentiment, expressed earlier by Jonathan Bennett, that it would be unfortunate if some of humanity's "important business" were left unfinished.[5] In this paper, however, I would like to set the interpretative project aside and to critically assess the idea that we have meaning-based reasons to prevent the extinction of humanity on its own merits.

Such an assessment would ideally encompass two issues. The first is whether we should recognize collective meaningfulness as a novel dimension of value, one that is analogous to individual meaningfulness. The second is what follows for matters related to extinction if we do. Here, I address the second issue. The first topic requires a longer discussion than I can afford here, and Knutzen's remarks already confer substantial plausibility on the concept of collective meaningfulness.

Perhaps the most influential account of individual meaningfulness has been articulated by Susan Wolf.[6] Wolf holds that the overall goodness of a person's life is determined not only by its welfare (that is, the subject's experiences, the satisfaction of their preferences, or the presence of various objective goods) but also by how meaningful that life is. On her view, meaning in life "consists in and arises from actively engaging in projects of worth."[7] In other terms, a person must sufficiently care about some project, that project must be objectively valuable, and one must actively engage in that project instead of just passively recognizing its value. Both welfare and meaning are genuinely reason giving: we should want welfare in our lives, and we should want meaning too. Wolf's view is also what Knutzen appears to be inspired by, as evidenced by the discussion on pages 10–12 of his article and the fact that it is the only view of meaningfulness that Knutzen explicitly mentions.

Against this background, I would like to examine what follows for matters pertaining to the prospect of extinction if collective meaningfulness is analogous to individual meaningfulness as articulated by Wolf. My contention is that the picture that emerges from these considerations is, in several important respects, different from the picture that emerges from Knutzen's discussion.

5 Bennett, "On Maximising Happiness."

6 Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning," *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, and "The Meanings of Lives."

7 Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, 26.

In particular, our meaning-based reasons turn out to apply to a wider range of circumstances in which humanity could have found itself or may one day face than Knutzen acknowledges. And they turn out to have a similar profile to welfare-based reasons, to which Knutzen wants to offer an alternative.[8]

1. What Are the Meaning-Conferring Projects?

According to Wolf, meaning in life arises from actively engaging in objectively valuable projects. Her definition of projects is liberal and encompasses "not only goal-directed tasks but other sorts of ongoing activities and involvements as well."[9] Still, three kinds of endeavors are especially prominent: "creating art," "adding to our knowledge of the world," and working towards "improvement in human or animal welfare."[10] As she points out, when we look for exemplars of meaningful lives, the names that first come to mind are "Mother Teresa, or Einstein, or Cézanne."[11] Indeed, even those philosophers who reject some aspects of Wolf's view tend to share the sentiment that archetypical meaningful lives are those in some way oriented towards (as Thaddeus Metz puts it) "the good, the true, and the beautiful."[12]

If individual and collective meaningfulness are analogous, as I want to assume for the purposes of this discussion, then collective meaning arises from humanity engaging in corresponding objectively valuable *collective* projects. These projects presumably include various large-scale endeavors aimed at creating art (e.g., the construction of Sagrada Família in Barcelona, set to be completed in 2026, over one hundred and forty years after the first stone was laid); expanding knowledge (e.g., the development of the Large Hadron Collider, the world's largest and most powerful particle accelerator, which enabled the discovery of the Higgs boson); and improving human and animal welfare (e.g., the abolition of slavery and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).[13] A future in which people continue to engage in such projects would be collectively meaningful, and it is plausible that we have a

8 While my discussion focuses on Wolf's "hybrid" theory of individual meaningfulness, it should be straightforward to see that at least some of the same conclusions follow from a variety of objectivist and subjectivist theories as well. For an overview of the literature, see Metz, "The Meaning of Life."

9 Wolf, "The Meanings of Lives," 95.

10 Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, 36–37.

11 Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, 11.

12 Metz, "The Meaning of Life."

13 I think that such projects need not be universally shared to give rise to collective meaning.

reason to prevent humanity's extinction insofar as and because it would close off that possibility.

Knutzen's discussion focuses on collective projects oriented towards "the True." He argues at length that "it would be meaningful for humanity to make further progress in science" (11) and suggests that the corresponding meaning-based reasons to continue our tenure are "terminal" (13). In particular, if humanity one day completes the project of science, there will no longer be a corresponding meaning-based reason to prevent our extinction.

Some of Knutzen's remarks can give the impression that in his view, the reasons grounded in the importance of making further progress in science exhaust our meaning-based reasons to prevent the extinction of humanity. For example, he writes that "ensuring that people do not go hungry is not a reason to keep the human story going, whereas finding out whether there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe might be such a reason" (6). But even if that is not Knutzen's considered view, it is still worth asking whether *all* meaning-based reasons to prevent the extinction of humanity are terminal.

If collective meaning arises from engaging in nontelic or moral collective projects such as creating art or ensuring that people are treated with respect and have decent lives, then not all meaning-based reasons to prevent our extinction are terminal. To be sure, particular artworks can be completed, as I hope Sagrada Família will be soon. But this magnificent structure is just a manifestation of our continued engagement with the project of artistic creation. Likewise, while slavery has been outlawed in most countries, it is still practiced more or less covertly in many parts of the world, and even just upholding current laws and norms requires sustained effort on our part. And because these projects are not terminal, neither are the meaning-based reasons to keep the human story going that they give rise to. This is the first way in which meaning-based reasons are less contingent than Knutzen's discussion makes them seem.

2. DOES PRIOR ENGAGEMENT MATTER?

A vital aspect of Wolf's account is that meaning in life is valuable in a genuinely reason-giving way. For example, a person who is not engaged in any valuable projects or does not sufficiently care about her projects has a reason to regret her situation.[14]

But meaning in life does not give us reasons just to hold certain attitudes. It also gives us reasons for action. According to Wolf, a person who is living a

14 Wolf, "The Meanings of Lives," 99.

meaningless life has a reason to do something about it, and we have reasons to promote meaning in the lives of others, too:

> It is part of an enlightened self-interest that one wants to secure meaning in one's life, or, at any rate, to allow and promote meaningful activity within it.[15]

> Recognizing that meaningfulness is a dimension of a good life distinct from happiness, and that meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness will give parents a reason to expose their children to a range of worthwhile activities and projects to which they might be "subjectively attracted" (that is, about which they might get passionate).[16]

These considerations are important for understanding the scope of meaning-based reasons to prevent extinction. To see that, suppose that humanity had never engaged in any valuable collective projects oriented towards "the True," "the Good," or "the Beautiful." In this counterfactual scenario, there are no active attempts to arrive at a systematic understanding of the universe, no ongoing artistic practices, and no efforts to make the world a better place. Instead, our species plods along in a state of "hazy passivity," a collective equivalent of the meaningless life of Wolf's "Blob."[17]

If collective meaningfulness is analogous to individual meaningfulness, then in such circumstances, humanity would have a reason to initiate meaning-conferring collective projects. In virtue of this, we could also have a reason to prevent extinction insofar as the continuation of our tenure would give us opportunities to engage in relevant endeavors and make our history more meaningful—as it plausibly would, in a wide range of cases.

Knutzen thinks about meaning-based reasons differently:

> If humanity had never taken on telic projects (e.g., by failing to embark on its civilizational adventure), or if it someday reached a stable equilibrium point at which there were no further valuable goal-directed collective tasks requiring completion, then there would be nothing valuable requiring completion and consequently no disvalue in extinction. (13)

He goes on to acknowledge that many will consider this "a very implausible result" and concedes that we might have to reach for alternative theories to explain the badness of extinction in the above cases.

15 Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning," 207.

16 Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, 128–29.

17 Wolf, "The Meanings of Lives," 93.

But if the analogy between collective and individual meaningfulness holds, the implausible result is avoided. As long as we can reasonably expect to actively engage in valuable collective projects at some point, we do have a meaning-based reason to extend our tenure. A meaningful future is, after all, better than no future at all. This is the second respect in which meaning-based reasons are less contingent than Knutzen's discussion makes them seem.

3. Is There an Asymmetry between Time and Space?

To showcase the attractiveness of the view that extinction is bad because it would close off the possibility of realizing certain further developments in culture, Knutzen compares it with the welfare-based explanation mentioned in the introduction above. (He terms the former *Unfinished Business* and the latter *Opportunity Cost*.)

> One reason why Unfinished Business is interesting is that it offers an alternative to one of the dominant paradigms for explaining extinction's badness. According to this paradigm, extinction any time soon would come at a massive opportunity cost in terms of achievable welfare over the lifetime of our species or our species' descendants. (2)

One of the flaws of the welfare-based view, Knutzen thinks, is that it treats the axes of time and space as symmetrical:

> Opportunity Cost is ultimately an ahistorical explanation of extinction's badness. It is ahistorical in the sense that history only matters contingently, not in any deep way. Opportunity Cost enjoins us to prefer a universe teeming for a short while with good lives over a universe with fewer good lives spread out over longer stretches of time. Indeed, as long as the math works out right, it enjoins us to prefer a single-generation universe over a trillion-generation universe. In this way, Opportunity Cost treats axes of time and space as symmetrical. The only reason to favor the perpetuation of life over greater spans of time is that this will (contingently) be the way value is maximized.... By contrast, Unfinished Business is essentially historical. (12–13)

I believe that Knutzen's interpretation of this aspect of Unfinished Business and our meaning-based reasons to prevent the extinction of humanity more broadly rests on a misconception. To see that, suppose that in one possible future, humanity manages to complete the project of science in five decades. This is not a fluke, let us grant it, but the product of great engagement and collaboration of billions of people. In another possible future, completing the

same project takes five thousand years, and it involves equivalent engagement and collaboration of billions of people. The only difference is how many people participate in this project at any given time. Other things being equal, these two possible futures are plausibly on a par in terms of collective meaning.

Needless to say, this is a highly stylized case. In more realistic circumstances, we would presumably favor a longer future for humanity. But that is just because, contingently, a longer future would likely turn out to be more collectively meaningful. Science takes time, and we can scarcely hope to arrive at a systematic understanding of the universe through the efforts of a single generation—much like we cannot hope to populate the world with trillions of happy lives in the same timeframe. Fundamentally, however, the meaning-based view features no deep asymmetry between time and space.

To be sure, the axis of time need not be entirely devoid of significance in the context of meaningfulness. It might be that a history of humanity in which we complete the project of science in a series of small steps is more collectively meaningful than the alternative in which we accomplish as much in one giant leap. But even then, there is no deep asymmetry between time and space to reckon with—just the apparent value of evenness to build into our axiology. As long as the math works out right, to put it in Knutzen's terms, a single-generation universe could still be more collectively meaningful than a trillion-generation universe. Moreover, the very same theoretical choice is open to proponents of the welfare-based account of extinction's badness. They too could postulate that it is in one way better if a given number of happy lives is distributed over longer stretches of time and could appeal to the significance of evenness. But there is no fundamental difference in terms of how the meaning-based and the welfare-based views treat the axes of time and space.

4. Concluding Remarks

Knutzen has proposed that certain further developments in culture would make our history more collectively meaningful and that premature extinction would be bad because it would close off that possibility.

In this paper, I have argued that if collective meaningfulness is analogous to individual meaningfulness as articulated by Wolf, then our meaning-based reasons to extend humanity's tenure do not have a terminal point, they would apply even if humanity were not currently engaged in any valuable collective projects, and they do not imply any deep asymmetry between time and space.

If I am right about this, our meaning-based reasons turn out to have a similar profile to our welfare-based reasons. Fundamentally, both of these views are concerned with the opportunity cost of extinction. The demise of our species

would close off the possibility of a future rich in welfare, and it would close off the possibility of a future rich in collective meaning, too.[18]

Given the conditional nature of my argument, there are two lessons that we can draw from the preceding discussion. On one hand, if individual and collective meaningfulness are indeed analogous, then the reasons at issue in Unfinished Business do not exhaust our meaning-based reasons to prevent the extinction of humanity, and the character of these meaning-based reasons is quite different from what Knutzen takes it to be. On the other hand, if the reasons at issue in Unfinished Business do exhaust our meaning-based reasons to prevent the extinction of humanity, and Knutzen is right about the character of these reasons, then my discussion reveals just how different our accounts of individual and collective meaning need to be. Developing an account of the latter would not simply be a matter of "extend[ing] the concept of meaningfulness beyond individual lives … to collective human endeavors" (14), as Knutzen sees himself doing. It would require an altogether novel set of arguments, as well as a compelling explanation for the discord between individual and collective levels of meaning. But regardless of which of these lessons we choose to draw, Knutzen's interesting proposal merits further philosophical attention.[19]

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18 To be sure, our meaning-based reasons are not completely analogous to our welfare-based reasons. As Knutzen acknowledges, Wolf thinks that meaning in life is something that we should want enough of, but perhaps not something that we should try to maximize. Collective meaning might have this profile too, though it remains an open question when, if ever, our history might become meaningful enough.

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