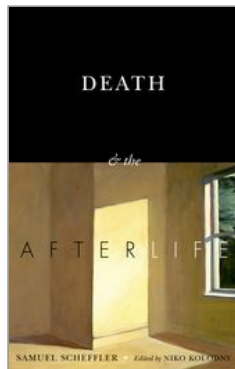


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Death and the Afterlife

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The Afterlife (Part I)

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Abstract and Keywords

We normally assume that other people will live on after we ourselves have died. Even if we do not believe in a personal afterlife, we assume that there will be a “collective afterlife” in which humanity survives long after we are gone. This assumption plays a neglected and surprisingly important role in our lives. Drawing on P. D. James’s novel *The Children of Men*, this chapter defends “the afterlife conjecture,” which holds that if we were faced with the prospect of humanity’s imminent extinction, we would lose confidence in the value of many of our most cherished activities. By contrast, the prospect of our own deaths does little to undermine that confidence. In certain respects, then, the future existence of people who are as yet unborn matters more to us than our own continued existence. This conclusion complicates widespread assumptions about human egoism.

Keywords: afterlife, human extinction, death, egoism, value, confidence, P. D. James

1.

My title 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 nonstandard 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 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 nonstandard 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 **(p.16)** 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 *valu*ing 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 *mattering* 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, I have examined the concept of valuing in particular, and I want to begin by saying something about how I understand that notion.¹ 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 **(p.17)** 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.

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 **(p.18)** 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.²

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 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 life span, 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, **(p.19)** 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 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 postmortem event that matters to us would not be one of our experiences.

(p.20) As against this, someone might object that, although the postmortem 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 postmortem event whose contemplation gave rise to that distress. If the postmortem 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 *nonexperientialist* 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.³

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 **(p.21)** 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 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 *nonconsequentialist* 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.⁴

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, **(p.22)** 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 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 nonexperiential and nonconsequentialist 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 postmortem 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 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.

(p.23) 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 **(p.24)** 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 only in the indeterminate future, if at all. 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 **(p.25)** 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 **(p.26)** 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 **(p.27)** 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 **(p.28)** 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 nonexperiential dimension of our values and concerns. So the knowledge that all 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 **(p.29)** have to experience all 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 premortem 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 nonexistence, 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 premortem 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 **(p.30)** 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 a while, 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 a while. 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 **(p.31)** 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 **(p.32)** 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, 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 **(p.33)** 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,⁵ human practices whose organizing purpose is to preserve what is valued beyond the life span of any single individual or generation. They are collaborative, multigenerational 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 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.⁶

(p.34) 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 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,⁷ 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 **(p.35)** 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 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.

(p.36) 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 make sense

only 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 make sense only 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. **(p.37)** 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 postmortem 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 **(p.38)** 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 *The Children of Men*,⁸ 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 having occurred in more than twenty-five years. The human race thus faces the prospect of imminent extinction as the last generation born gradually dies out.⁹ The plot of the book revolves around the **(p.39)** 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 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.

(p.40) 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 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 **(p.41)** 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 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 **(p.42)** 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 **(p.43)** 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 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, **(p.44)** 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 the 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” in the face of the more or less universal assumption that our default motivations are powerfully self-interested.¹⁰ 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, 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 **(p.45)** that all 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 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 nonexistence 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.¹¹

(p.46) 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 has 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 **(p.47)** last generation, those who grew up with this understanding would simply lack such confidence from the outset.

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 **(p.48)** 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 or 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 preprogrammed caregiver robots¹²), then they, and by implication the rest of the living, could contemplate the imminent end of 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 **(p.49)** effect on either the physical comfort or the longevity of any living person.¹³ That, at any rate, is what the afterlife conjecture supposes. In the second lecture, I will explore some of the additional implications of this conjecture, which seem to me far-reaching. **(p.50)**

Notes:

(1.) Valuing,” in *Equality and Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), ch. 1, 15–40.

(2.) David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," in *Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 68–94

(3.) Robert Nozick in his discussion of "the experience machine" in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 42–45.

(4.) 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.

(5.) "The Normativity of Tradition," in *Equality and Tradition*, ch. 11, 287–311.

(6.) 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," 305.

(7.) Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in David Owen and Tracy Strong eds., *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), 1–31.

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

(9.) On July 28, 2009, *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>, wrote an article titled “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>. 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 the world's population becomes infertile leads him ultimately in a different direction. Neither Cowen nor Brooks cites *The Children of Men*, although online reader comments responding to Cowen's blog post and to Brooks's column both note the connection.

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

(11.) Dan Moller, “Love and Death,” *Journal of Philosophy* 104 (2007): 301–16.

(12.) *Wired* <http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2010/01/toyota-sees-robotic-nurses-in-your-lonely-final-years/>, Calum MacLeod, “A Glimpse of the Future: Robots Aid Japan's Elderly Residents,” *USA Today*, Nov. 5, 2009, http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/robotics/2009-11-04-japan-robots_N.htm.

(13.) 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 nonhuman 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 nonhuman persons. 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. Nonhuman 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 nonhuman 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 nonhuman 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.



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