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Surname, Initial(s). (2012). Title of the thesis or dissertation (Doctoral Thesis / Master's Dissertation). Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg. Available from: http://hdl.handle.net/102000/0002 (Accessed: 22 August 2017).

Life, Procreation, and Transcendence: Toward an Ethic for the Future of Humanity

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of
the requirements of the degree
PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR

in
Philosophy
in the
Faculty of Humanities
at the
University of Johannesburg

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Supervisor: Prof Thaddeus Metz

November 2018

DECLARATION

This Thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

Portions of this work appear in:

Singh, A. 2009. *The Aporia of Creation: Anti-natalism and the Harm of Existence*. Unpublished Honours Essay: University of Johannesburg.

Singh, A. 2012. *Assessing Anti-Natalism: A Philosophical Examination of the Morality of Procreation*. Unpublished Masters Dissertation: University of Johannesburg.

Singh, A. 2012. Furthering the case for anti-natalism: Seana Shiffrin and the limits of permissible harm. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31(1):104-116.

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This Thesis contains 79 648 words including footnotes and appendices but excluding reference material.

ABSTRACT

Anti-natalism is the view that it is (almost) always wrong to bring people into existence. This view is most famously defended by David Benatar. I attempt to answer the following question in this thesis: If we are to take the badness of extinction seriously, are there conditions under which procreation may still be permissible, despite the fact that it (currently) involves the creation of beings who will suffer—conditions Benatar and other anti-natalists have either overlooked or under-explored? My approach is unique relative to other discussions of Benatar, in the sense that I grant that his arguments are strong, and that procreation is indeed morally problematic. But I deny that procreation is wrong *all things considered*, because, as I discuss in depth in this thesis, there are some morally relevant things he does not consider. Specifically, I introduce unexplored non-welfarist (dignity, meaning in life) and welfarist (transhumanism) considerations to the natal debate. The strategy I adopt undercuts many of the anti-natal prescriptions Benatar thinks necessarily follow from his arguments for the *pro tanto* moral wrongness of procreation, and also apply to other forms of anti-natalism.

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PREFACE

I am a recovering anti-natalist. I still think that, by any objective measure, most of my life was not worth living, and I still think that it should not have been started. However, I could not help but be transformed through the exploration of the arguments contained within these pages. I genuinely consider my life to be much richer for having struggled through these ideas.

This is not the thesis the anti-natalist version of me had set out to write. *That* thesis was to have defended anti-natalism against three powerful objections. Those objections can still be found in the thesis in its present form—though, much to my own surprise, in following the arguments where they led, I ended up with a thesis advocating a modest form of natal-optimism.

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I could not have completed this life-transforming project without the care and wisdom of many people. I should start by thanking my parents. My father liked to introduce the childhood version of me by saying: "This is my son. He wants to become a doctor." Well, you weren't clear on what *kind* of doctor I should aim at becoming, so this will have to do. Thank you for sacrificing so much so that I could have the chance to flourish, a possibility that was stolen from you and your generation. You left this world just as I was starting to make peace with being in it. I am sorry that I could not get well sooner, but I am glad that we could finally have a little time together before you had to go. To my mother, who still wants me to come back home, thank you for giving me the gift of empathy. And thank you for all you have done to protect and care for us. I am lucky to have had your kindness as an example. I love

you. To my brother, Vishal, thank you for always being supportive of this crazy dream of studying philosophy. I am just about getting started, but I think that it might get a little easier from here on. In any event, I could not have gotten to this advanced stage of befuddlement without your encouragement. To my sister, Preisha, thank you for frequently checking in on me to ensure that I am happy, healthy, and not forgotten. I have another sibling who probably will not read this thesis, but if he does, he should focus especially on Part One.

To my friends, thank you for tolerating me. I know that I can sometimes be difficult, what with my highfalutin ideas and all. I am particularly indebted to a few of you. Navin Ramsamuj, thank you for saving me, and thank you for introducing me to the majesty of our Hindu ancestry. You are the closest thing to a guru I have ever had. Chetan Marahaj, thank you for always being so incredibly supportive, and thank you for your patience. We have many years left to explore the galaxy together, brother. Ajith Sookdeo, thank you for your incomparable wisdom and humour… and for the discount on the laptop I used to complete most of this thesis.

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Shane Dugmore, thank you for always encouraging me to keep growing. I am certain that you have a beautiful life ahead of you, full of all the exciting things philosophers aren't supposed to (admit they) covet. Farhan Esat, thank you for helping me maintain my equanimity in the face of the world behind the curtain. Our many conversations helped motivate me to keep going with this thesis—thank you. I still maintain that you are the Next Big Thing. To two exemplary human beings (of light), Leyla and Ryan Haidarian, thank you for welcoming me into the Bahá'í community. And thank you for reminding me to polish my mirror. You have given me so much.

Katarina Bulovic, my fellow INFJ, thank you for staying in my corner when others had left. Your friendship has been invaluable. And finally, Carien Smith: So much more is possible with you in the world. Your words and ideas will live on long after mine have been forgotten.

I should acknowledge funding that went some way to ensuring that this thesis could be realised. I am grateful to the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Science (NIHSS) for awarding me a full doctoral scholarship. I am also grateful to Alex Broadbent and Thaddeus Metz for offering me funding to jump start my doctoral studies.

I am indebted to the Department of Philosophy at the University in Johannesburg for fostering the ideal conditions to ensure my intellectual flourishing. In particular, I would like to thank Hennie Lötter and Catherine Botha. Hennie, thank you for believing in me, and for 'adopting' me. I hope to fulfil the potential you see in me. Catherine, I cannot thank you enough for all you have done to ensure that I could get this thesis past the finish line. You are a special human being, and we are all very lucky to have you as a colleague and friend.

And finally, I am indebted to my supervisor, Thaddeus Metz. To so many of us young philosophers, he is our rock: A mountain who carries us high, so that we may perhaps briefly glimpse the beauty of the world through something approaching philosophers' eyes. Thank you, Prof Metz. I would not have reached this stage of my academic career without your guidance and support. This thesis is dedicated to you.

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1. Introduction

> I have no conscience, none…but I would not like to bring a soul into this world. When it sinned and when it suffered something like a dead hand would fall on me—'You did it, you, for your own pleasure you created this thing! See your work!'
>
> Olive Schreiner (*The Story of an African Farm*)[1]

1.1. The Research Question

One of the most thought-provoking, elegantly defended, and important positions in contemporary ethics is one that entails that it would be best, all things considered, if we aimed at going extinct as a species.[2] Extinction is, of course, a very unsettling implication for any position—no matter how well defended—to have, and as one of its most ardent supporters (Singh 2009, 2012a, 2012b), I would like to find counter arguments to help change my mind.

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At its core, anti-natalism implies the view that coming into existence is (almost) always a harm that outweighs any of its benefits (Benatar 1997, 2006).[3] This view has gained much attention (and some adherents) in recent years. It entails, in conjunction with other claims, taking the position that we morally should not create children. In

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[1] Schreiner (2009[1888]:314). These lines are uttered by the character Lyndall.

[2] Arguably, the most elegant defences of anti-natalism are advanced by David Benatar, and I discuss his arguments in some depth in this thesis.

[3] Though this is the dominant form of anti-natalism, I should note that not that all forms of anti-natalism need suppose this. For example, Gerald Harrison's rationale for anti-natalism, which I discuss in §2 of this introductory chapter, does not deny that procreation can benefit potential children; it does deny, though, that we have a duty to create these children.

other words, procreation is considered an impermissible harm to impose on the one created. When I refer to "anti-natalism" in my thesis, I refer to this negative moral judgement regarding procreation because of the expected harm to the one created. David Benatar's controversial book, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006), gives the most comprehensive defence of anti-natalism to date. In this thesis, I highlight the fact that Benatar and many other anti-natalists defend a *thoroughgoing anti-natalism*. By this I mean that they do not fail to see that extinction is a consequence of their view, nor do they take this to be a *reductio* of their arguments for anti-natalism; rather, extinction is embraced as the solution to human suffering (or to the threat the human species poses to other species and the environment in general). In contrast, I argue that (voluntary) extinction is morally untenable.

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Anti-natalism will no doubt seem a strange view to many, but recent developments in moral philosophy have rendered it a most pertinent one. Bringing people into existence exposes them to benefits they would not otherwise enjoy, but it also exposes them to harm (think: illness, fractured bones, heartache). Why expose people to the harms of existence if there is no need to? Procreation, most moral philosophers (from the Western tradition, at least) would agree, is not morally required; we *are* morally required, however, to avoid harming unnecessarily. It appears that we harm unnecessarily when we create people, which entails that it would be wrong to do so. Though we expose people to the (supposed) benefits of existence when we create them, we are not morally required to promote benefits in the same way that we are morally required to prevent harms.

I attempt to answer the following question in this thesis: If we are to take the badness of extinction seriously, are there conditions under which procreation may still be permissible, despite the fact that it (currently) involves the creation of beings who will suffer non-trivial harms—conditions Benatar and other anti-natalists have either overlooked or under-explored?[4] My approach is unique relative to other discussions of Benatar, in the sense that I grant that his arguments are strong, and that procreation is indeed morally problematic. But I deny that procreation is wrong *all things considered*, because, as I discuss in depth in this thesis, there are some morally relevant things he does not consider. The strategy I adopt thus undercuts many of the anti-natal prescriptions he thinks necessarily follow from his arguments for the *pro tanto* moral wrongness of procreation. I should note that Benatar does discuss the possibility that it might be morally permissible to create a child under certain circumstances, but when he does so, his conclusions are consistently anti-natal, while mine are more favourable toward procreation. [5]

1.2. Clarification of the Project and Scope

I adopt a two-tiered strategy. Firstly, I suggest ways in which we can review the morality of harming to a) bestow benefits, and b) prevent greater harms; potentially, my examination makes imposing the harms of procreation appear outweighed by

[4] As my arguments bear upon their views as well, it is worth mentioning that new arguments for anti-natalism have recently been put forward (Belshaw 2012, Harrison & Tanner 2011, Harrison 2012, Häyry 2004).

[5] For example, Benatar (2006:128-131) discusses cases where parents create a child to save the life of one of their existing children by serving, for example, as a bone marrow transplant donor. Briefly, Benatar argues that parents who act in this fashion can be said to be violating the Kantian injunction against treating people as mere means; but this is even more conspicuously true, he says, in ordinary cases of procreation—that is, cases where parents procreate simply because they want children.

greater moral considerations. Secondly, I examine the possibility, inspired by cutting edge trends in bioethics, that under certain conceivable circumstances, procreation need not lead to significant harm, or even to harm *at all*. This two-tiered strategy is developed via three objections to anti-natalism, which I discuss below.

Benatar offers two arguments for anti-natalism: a relatively moderate one, and a more extreme version. The extreme version argues that procreation is nearly always impermissible due to a fundamental asymmetry between harms and benefits, whereby (all things considered) the benefits of being in existence, no matter how large, cannot ever outweigh the harms, no matter how small (Benatar 1997, 2006). It should not be too controversial to say that we are harmed by being brought into existence; existence does, after all, contain bad things. We are, however, also seemingly *benefited* by being created, due to the wonderful things we of course can enjoy only by being in existence. Benatar's strong anti-natalism doesn't deny that we can (and do) experience such benefits; what it does deny, however, is that these benefits offer any "real advantages" (2006:92) over never existing. After all, non-existers do not suffer from the *lack* of the benefits of existence—a state of affairs which is neither good nor bad—whereas (Benatar wants to say) the fact that non-existers cannot suffer harms is good. Thus, coming into existence is *always* a "net harm" compared to non-existence (Benatar 2006:1).

Furthermore, given that bringing a person into existence always results in a net harm being bestowed upon that person, Benatar concludes that *one ethically ought never to bring people into existence*. Indeed, given this fundamental asymmetry, even if a life contained only the pain of a pin-prick, it would still be wrong to start it (Benatar

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2006:48). But it is important to note that the degree of harm matters. If the world contained only the pain of a pin-prick, procreation might still be morally wrong, according to the asymmetry argument, but could be morally permissible, all things considered.

Anticipating this move, the more moderate version of anti-natalism, doesn't appeal to the asymmetry between harms and benefits. Here, Benatar believes he provides a way he believes provides *independent* reasons for the same anti-natal conclusion as the extreme version. He argues that our lives are far worse than we delude ourselves into thinking, that this is in effect a "world of suffering" (Benatar 2006:88). Given the very high probability that those brought into existence will experience a significant degree of suffering, Benatar concludes that we ought not to bring new potential sufferers into existence. After all, a typical life contains far more harm than merely that of a pin-prick.

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I do not directly examine Benatar's asymmetry argument, as this would be a separate (and major) project worthy of a thesis-length treatment, and doing so is unnecessary for the aim of motivating Benatar's view as plausible and worth taking seriously (not concluding that it is correct).[6] I do grant for the sake of argument, however, that Benatar is right when he says that if only welfarist considerations are taken into account, it is morally wrong to procreate. To be clear, Benatar's arguments, and anti-natal arguments in general, appeal mainly to welfarist intuitions. But welfare is not

[6] For prominent criticisms of Benatar's asymmetry argument, see: Bayne (2010); Boonin (2012); Bradley (2010); Brill (2012); Brown (2011); DeGrazia (2010); Harman (2009a); Kaposy (2009); Metz (2011a); Smilansky (2012); and Weinberg (2012). And, for criticisms aimed at his quality of life argument, see: Degrazia (2012); Smilansky (2008); and Trisel (2012). Benatar has defended (2012, 2013) his arguments against these and other critics.

the only thing that matters when making ethical judgements, and I show how an exploration of other, non-welfarist goods can offer a plausible challenge to anti-natalism.[7] I therefore adopt a strategy that broadens the natal debate by introducing non-welfarist considerations, specifically dignity and meaning in life.

What happens when we apply a dignity-based analysis to the natal debate? The welfare-based anti-natal position aims to limit harm—to the point of allowing for the extinction of humanity (which would eradicate harm). However, a dignity-based approach to ethics might prohibit us from allowing the human race from going extinct. This is so, because such an ethic would require us to respect beings with dignity, namely humans, and failing to prevent the extinction of human beings would arguably be a failure in our duty to respect human dignity.

Thus, in Part One of my thesis, I examine whether it is permissible to procreate in that procreation respects the dignity of persons by aiming to prevent or forestall human extinction. As have said, anti-natalism seems, for one thing, to disrespect the (assumed) intrinsic value of the species. There is a line of argument that needs to be explored which defends procreation from the perspective of human dignity. This has been suggested in the literature, most notably by Spurrett (2011) and Metz (2012a:8-9), but has yet to be fleshed out.

Since dignity is a controversial concept in bioethics, with some calling for it to be abandoned (Macklin 2003; Pinker 2008), I first offer a novel interpretation of the

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[7] Philosophers often equate "welfare" with "well-being"; the latter refers to how well one's life is going, and is sometimes cashed out in hedonistic terms—that is, in terms of happiness conceived as the balance of pleasure to pain in a life. I use the terms "welfare" and "well-being" interchangeably in this thesis.

concept. According to this new version, what gives a person dignity is her very capacity to value—or, more precisely, her quintessentially human capacity to *care* about value. I argue that when viewed in these terms, dignity provides strong moral reasons to prevent or forestall the human from going extinct. We thus ought to be sceptical of a thoroughgoing anti-natalism.

However, I conclude that dignity alone only gives us enough to defend a general prescription against allowing humanity to go extinct; it does not help us defend individual acts of procreation against the claims of the anti-natalist (when there is no threat of extinction). But the second and third parts of my thesis build upon this significant first step in challenging a thoroughgoing anti-natalism and showing why procreation, despite its (current) risks, might not in fact be all-things-considered impermissible.

Continuing my critique of anti-natalism via non-welfarist values, I extend my discussion to include meaning in life. Specifically, in Part Two of my thesis, I examine how meaningfulness bears upon the natal debate. My strategy here is similar to the one I adopt in the first part of my thesis on dignity. That is to say, I do not simply look at meaning in life in terms of how procreation might directly benefit parents and their offspring. Rather, I focus primarily on the role meaningfulness plays in our lives via the examination of a thought experiment discussed by Samuel Scheffler (2013). This thought experiment asks us to imagine how people would react if they knew humanity would soon go extinct.

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Scheffler claims, and I find this very plausible, that the last humans would experience their lives as almost completely devoid of meaning. Consequently, I argue that it would be morally impermissible for us to sacrifice this much meaning in our lives, and conclude that we ought not to accept a thoroughgoing anti-natalism. My approach here is novel in the context of anti-natalism, because though Benatar (and others, as I will discuss) briefly discusses meaning, I offer a far more in-depth examination that takes into account the non-welfarist value that is meaning in a manner Benatar does not anticipate.

But procreation remains deeply morally problematic, given the harms a potential child would face. A typical life may indeed contain too much harm, represent too much risk to a potential child, for it to be permissible to create her (according to the anti-natalist). But what if a human life did not contain as much harm as it typically does today? What if it contained far less harm, or even none at all?

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In Part Three of my thesis, I address these welfarist considerations directly. I explore whether or not it would be permissible to bring humans of a sufficiently altered physical makeup into the world—even if Benatar is indeed correct that it is not permissible to create "normal" humans. Philosophers who advocate the view known as "transhumanism" argue, among other things, for the use of technology (More 2013) and applied reason (More 1990) to alter the human (biological) condition. I argue that transhumanism can offer, at least in principle, a forceful and illuminating challenge to anti-natalism. Both transhumanists and anti-natalists believe that the eventual elimination of (unnecessary) human suffering is something toward which we ought to aim, but transhumanists are firmly against extinction, whilst anti-natalism actively

supports it. I show why the aims of transhumanists are realistic, and argue that anti-natalism ought to revise its "solution" to human suffering accordingly. To the best of my knowledge, anti-natalism and transhumanism have not been compared in this way before, let alone utilised to strengthen each other's case.

Nevertheless, the reader need not endorse the claims made by transhumanism; he or she need only understand how such claims might be used mount a forceful challenge to anti-natalism, were these claims true. This part of my thesis can thus be viewed as a kind of thought experiment that might help answer the following question: If it were possible to create (trans)humans who will enjoy lives of a radically higher quality, mightn't this address the welfarist concerns of anti-natalism, and thus render procreation (of this sort, at least) permissible?

I should once again stress that in the first two parts of my thesis, the success of my arguments for the permissibility of procreation do not depend on what would be good for the potential child, or his or her parents. I do not, therefore, explore whether procreation disrespects the dignity of the person brought into existence. And I do not examine whether it is permissible to procreate if we are sure that our offspring will live a meaningful, even if harmful, life (considered in Metz 2011a:249). Though these are important issues that deserve detailed treatments, *I believe that a general prescription against a thoroughgoing anti-natalism can be defended without appealing to the interests of potential children.* In order to strengthen this general prescription into a moderate pro-natalism, one can then appeal to, as I do in the final part of my thesis, ways in which the lives of potential children could be made radically free of harm.

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Finally, I should note that it is controversial to say that we can harm people by bringing them into existence.[8] However, I accept—as reasonably motivated by Benatar and others, and ultimately for the sake of argument—that there is some moral wrongness to bringing persons into existence, by virtue of the fact that this exposes them to harm. In addition, I should also note that I find noncomparative accounts of harm and benefit attractive, though I do not explicitly offer arguments in defence of them in this thesis.[9] Lastly, I note that there those who argue, *contra* Benatar, that being created can both harm and benefit a person.[10]

1.3. Importance of the project, novelty of approach, and contribution to the field

Overall, I contribute to moral philosophy a critical exploration of anti-natalism in light of values other than human well-being, which up to now has been the central way it has been appraised. First, I contribute to moral philosophy a discussion of anti-natalism in light of the value of dignity, and whether it can provide reasons to procreate—despite the prospect of harm to the ones created. This is something that also has yet to be done in a thorough way. Further, I offer a novel understanding of the concept of dignity, one which, I argue, avoids some of the issues faced by the Kantian conception of the concept.

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[8] See: Parfit (1984:351-374), and also Kavka (1982).

[9] Seana Shiffrin introduces (1999:123-131) and offers an in-depth defence of (2012) an influential noncomparative account of harm and benefit. See also the noncomparative account presented in Harman (2009b). For an in-depth critique of noncomparative accounts, and the concept of harm in general, see: Bradley (2012). Rabenberg (2015) also offers a critical summary of several accounts of harm.

[10] For an influential defence of this view, as well as a proposed solution to the non-identity problem, see: Harman (2004). See also: McMahan (2012).

Second, my proposed study applies the burgeoning literature on meaning in life to anti-natalism, something that has yet to be done systematically. At the time of writing, only a handful of sentences have been devoted to this topic in the literature. I offer a modest attempt to help fill this void. In addition, my primary focus in the part of my thesis on meaning in life is on the issue of meaning in the context of future generations. Surprisingly, this is a topic that has received very little attention in the Western philosophical tradition, and my discussion represents an early contribution to this burgeoning field of enquiry.

Third, I examine two fields that are at the forefront of contemporary ethics: anti-natalism and transhumanism. Again, to the best of my knowledge, the two have yet to be applied to each other. I examine whether transhumanism can be used to offer a critique of the anti-natalist's proposed solution to the harms of existence—namely voluntary human extinction. Specifically, and importantly, I do not attempt to refute the arguments of the anti-natalist in respect of harm; instead I aim at blocking his move to a pro-extinction conclusion. Furthermore, I use anti-natalism to bolster the aims of transhumanism, something I have also yet to see being suggested in the literature. On my proposed view, if the core claim of anti-natalism is true, then transhumanism becomes something we are arguably morally obligated to support.

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I should also say that, in my view, there is arguably no more important question in moral philosophy than the question of whether or not we ought to bring people into existence. Anti-natalism is still a very new field of research, though, and I am one of a small but growing group of researchers engaged with it. Views on procreation are still clouded by instinct and culture, but the work to clear up and advance humanity's

thinking has begun in earnest. Similarly, transhumanism is now being seriously examined in and outside of academia, and my hunch is that transhumanist ideas will begin to form a large part of academic and public discussions in the coming decades.

1.4. Overview of the project

My project has three major parts. The first two parts look at how a specific non-welfarist value—dignity and meaning in life, respectively—might bear upon anti-natalism. The third tackles welfarist issues head on by examining how anti-natalism ought to be revised in light of transhumanism and human enhancement technologies.

Before I address the above issues, I briefly discuss prominent arguments for anti-natalism (Chapter 2). I divide these anti-natalist arguments into four rationales or types—namely, welfarist, nihilist, consent-based, or misanthropic arguments. Since he is the most prominent anti-natalist writing today, I devote the most space to discussing Benatar's arguments. But it should be noted that the natal-friendly arguments I introduce in this thesis pose a challenge to other rationales for anti-natalism as well.

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The following paragraphs offer a more detailed breakdown of the structure of my argumentation within each of the three major parts of my thesis. In Part One, I argue that a revised understanding of the concept of dignity can challenge anti-natalism, specifically insofar as anti-natalism fails to offer a solution to the problem of human suffering that respects the inherent worth of the species. The revised understanding of dignity that I present is original, and I introduce it in response to (in)famous claims in

the bioethics literature that dignity ought to be abandoned. Though this version of dignity accords with the Kantian understanding of dignity insofar as it assigns to every human being a superlative, inherent value worthy of respect, it denies that the basis of this value is that person's rationality, or her capacity to autonomously pursue ends. Rather, my revised understanding of dignity locates the dignity of a person in her capacity to care (about a certain cluster of values). I conclude that dignity forbids us from allowing or actively assisting the human race from going extinct.

Part Two is devoted to meaning in life. I limit my discussion to the issue of how the belief that we will be survived by future generations bears upon the natal debate. I proceed as follows. First, I briefly discuss the importance of meaningfulness—in particular, its relationship to welfare—to the natal debate. I follow this up by exploring whether the potential for meaningful bonds between parents and their children can be used to defend procreation. I then offer a summary of a recent view, forwarded by Samuel Scheffler (2013), that the promise of future generations is necessary for us to experience our lives as meaningful. I then respond to criticisms of this view in the literature, and show how they might also be used to defend procreation. Benatar has weighed in on the issue of how meaning should factor into the natal debate. I offer a brief response to his views. Thereafter, I discuss Scheffler's position in light of anti-natalism, taking care in this discussion to show how the issue of meaning and future generations weighs against anti-natalism—something which, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been done in the natal debate.

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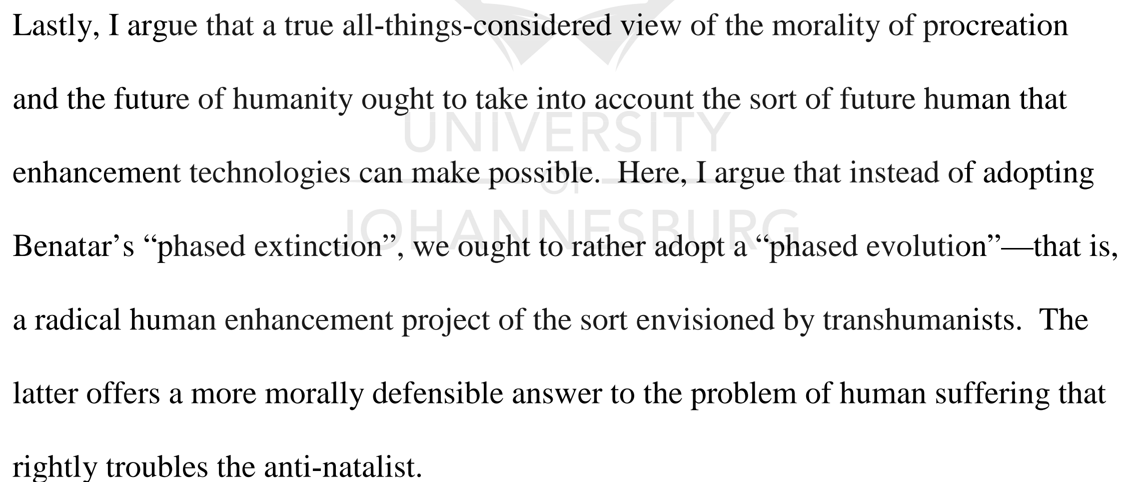
Unlike the previous two parts, Part Three defends procreation on welfarist grounds. Specifically, I look at the transhumanist movement and human enhancement in general. I first offer some preliminary remarks on the value of pain, since some philosophers think that pain serves an indispensable purpose, and that this fact weighs against the likes of anti-natalism. I then provide an overview of transhumanism, taking care to show how it relates to anti-natalism. Thereafter, I examine some objections to transhumanism, followed by responses to them. Next, I show why anti-natalism ought to be revised in light of transhumanism. I then bring the discussion back to the claim from Part One that we have a prima facie duty to avoid extinction. I show how this ties in with transhumanism, which allows us to think beyond anti-natalism's solution of voluntary extinction.



Lastly, I argue that a true all-things-considered view of the morality of procreation and the future of humanity ought to take into account the sort of future human that enhancement technologies can make possible. Here, I argue that instead of adopting Benatar's "phased extinction", we ought to rather adopt a "phased evolution"—that is, a radical human enhancement project of the sort envisioned by transhumanists. The latter offers a more morally defensible answer to the problem of human suffering that rightly troubles the anti-natalist.

2. Arguments for anti-natalism

In this chapter, I look at prominent arguments for anti-natalism. I do not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature. Rather, I limit myself to anti-natal views most relevant to the natal-friendly themes introduced in this thesis. And I largely limit criticism of these anti-natal views to my own responses. What is more, as David Benatar's anti-natalism is by some way the most comprehensive and well-known version of the position, I expound his arguments in the greatest detail, both in this overview and in my thesis in general. Indeed, when I refer to "anti-natalism" or "the anti-natalist" in this thesis, I generally have Benatar's views in mind, but the criticisms I introduce in this thesis are also relevant to other rationales for anti-natalism.

I suggest that anti-natal views can be categorised according to four distinct motivations. Specifically, there are welfarist, nihilist, consent-based, or misanthropic arguments for anti-natalism. There is often some overlap of these categories. For example, a consent-based argument for anti-natalism gets its real normative force from the fact that significant harm is involved (see Shiffrin 1999). And Arthur Schopenhauer's anti-natalism seems to be motivated by both nihilism and welfarist considerations. I spell out these four categories below.

2.1. Welfarist motivations for anti-natalism

These anti-natal views derive their motivation primarily from considering the harms that potential offspring will suffer. Here, anti-natalists are at pains to stress that these

harms are neither non-trivial, nor outweighed by potential pleasures. For example, when describing the suffering of the world, in particular the asymmetrical relationship between pleasure and pain, Arthur Schopenhauer famously asks us to "compare the respective feelings of two animals, one of which is engaged in eating the other" (Schopenhauer 1942:2). These Schopenhauerian intuitions are very evident in the anti-natal arguments of David Benatar. Below, I unpack Benatar's arguments in some detail, focussing specifically on the arguments contained in his book, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006). I then discuss other salient welfarist motivations for anti-natalism.

David Benatar[11]

Most of the contemporary literature on natalism focuses on Benatar's arguments. My thesis is also grounded within this Benatar-based discussion. Benatar's primary anti-natal argument can be referred to as his "asymmetry argument", and attempts to prove that there is a fundamental asymmetry between harms and benefits, such that the benefits of coming into existence never outweigh the harms. Benatar claims that we all share the assumption that we have a moral duty to *avoid harming* people, whilst we do not really afford *causing pleasure* such a comparable status (Benatar 2006:32). And so, for example, we do not tend to think that we have a "duty" to bring new *happy* people into existence, whereas we do think of it as a duty to avoid bringing some potential *sufferers* into existence—persons whom we know will be born with horrible birth defects, for instance (Benatar 2006:32).[12]

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[11] This explication of Benatar's views borrows from Singh (2012a).

[12] Benatar lists (2012:129) four asymmetries that are explained by what he calls the "basic asymmetry" (Benatar 2012:128). The one I discuss in this sentence is "the asymmetry of procreational duties" (Benatar 2012:129)

Whilst it would be strange for us to assert that we have the first duty (namely the "duty" to create new happy people), the second impression (namely to avoid harming potential sufferers) is to us, Benatar thinks, quite intuitive (Benatar 2006:32). And thus, whilst in the first instance we would be benefiting new existers,[13] we do not take this *in itself* to be a sufficiently good reason to create these persons—we do not, in other words, claim that coming into existence is a good we should promote *for the sake of that person*; on the other hand, we *do* feel that we would be doing a duty by preventing a potential sufferer from experiencing suffering (Benatar 2006:32-33).[14] Benatar (2006:30-49) argues that these intuitions can best be explained by the claim that there is an *asymmetrical relationship* between pleasure and pain:

(1) the presence of pain is bad,

and

(2) the presence of pleasure is good.

whilst

(3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone,

whereas

(4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.

(Benatar 2006:30)

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[13] I realise, as does Benatar, that this way of speaking is open to a number of objections; because, for one, how can one speak of "persons" whilst simultaneously acknowledging that "they" don't exist? However, this manner of speaking is nonetheless useful and has no ready alternative.

[14] I note that, strictly speaking, I may be conflating two asymmetries here, namely the asymmetry of procreational duties (see footnote 4, above) and "the prospective beneficence asymmetry" (Benatar 2012:129). For the purposes of my project, though, this is not of great importance.

Whereas there is a symmetrical relationship between (1) and (2) (pain = bad, pleasure = good), there is no such symmetry between (3) and (4) (no pain = good, no pleasure = *not bad*). This asymmetrical relationship can also be represented thus:

Scenario A **(X exists)**	**Scenario B** **(X never exists)**
(1) Presence of pain (Bad)	(3) Absence of pain (Good)
(2) Presence of pleasure (Good)	(4) Absence of Pleasure (Not Bad)

(Benatar 2006:38)

Only existers (Scenario A) suffer harms (that is, experience pain: a disadvantage to coming into existence), whilst non-existers (Scenario B) cannot (an advantage to not being in, and motivation for us to resist causing non-existers to come into, existence). This is the case not merely because only existers suffer, but also because the absence of pleasure in Scenario B is "not bad", because no one is deprived by its absence. In quadrants (1) and (2), the relationship between harms and benefits is symmetrical ("bad" to "good").

On the other hand, whilst it can be argued that at least in the case of a life worth continuing, the benefits of pleasure outweigh the harms of pain, this does not represent a real counterweight to the above-mentioned fundamental relationship between absent pain and pleasure. For it must be remembered that whilst the absence of pain is good, the absence of pleasure is not bad, meaning that a life is not worth

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starting if it will have any pain. This represents an *asymmetrical* relationship—one which will not provide an adequate counterweight to the apparently symmetrical one between the presence of both harms and benefits, namely (1) and (2).

Thus (1) and (2) in Scenario A and (3) and (4) in Scenario B are *not* two sides of the same coin: in the case of non-existers, the relationship between harms and benefits cannot, according to Benatar, ever be used to justify bringing them into existence. Indeed, this fundamental asymmetry between harms and benefits provides a real challenge for those with pro-natal intuitions, for it appears as though the benefits of coming into existence never outweigh the harms. Benatar thus concludes that, despite the widespread belief that most acts of creation result in an overall benefit to progeny, creation in fact results in an overall harm—a "net harm" (Benatar 2006:1).

It could be said that all Benatar's asymmetry shows is that it is only because *coming into* existence creates the (very high) *probability* of being harmed (where such a probability would not otherwise exist) that coming into existence is a harm. Being brought *into* existence, in other words, exposes one to the harms *of* existence. The pro-natalist could concede this whilst asserting that existence also has its *benefits*, and that the leap from asymmetry to anti-natalism is yet harder to justify in the light of these benefits. Being in existence (Scenario A), in other words, also allows one to enjoy the benefits of existence—not just the harms.

But Benatar has already responded to this objection, with Scenario B intending to show that these benefits (of existence—Scenario A) don't represent "real advantages" (Benatar 2006:92) over never existing, since their absence would not be bad in the

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case of the non-existent. Benatar's asymmetry, to reiterate, suggests not simply that *coming into* existence is a harm (given the exposure to harm), but that *existence itself* is, all things considered, a harm. To put this in other words, though *whilst one exists* the benefits of being in existence might influence one to (falsely, in Benatar's view) believe that these benefits outweigh the harms, this does not alter the fact that one would not have been harmed by the absence of these benefits, and that one was harmed by being brought into existence. And hence, assessing whether or not creation is a permissible harm involves more than merely factoring in the harms and benefits experienced *within* existence (that is, Scenario A); it is a decision that must be viewed from a perspective that takes into account existence *and* non-existence (that is, Scenarios A *and* B). Existers suffer harms and enjoy benefits; non-existers do not suffer harms, but do not suffer from the *absence* of benefits either.

It is important to note that Benatar believes he has another way of coming to an anti-natal conclusion, a way he believes provides *independent* reasons for the same conclusion. Benatar (2006:93) explicitly states that "[t]here is more than one way to reach this conclusion", one which provides a basis "*independent of asymmetry and its implications*, for regretting one's existence and for taking all actual cases of coming into existence to be harmful" (Benatar 2006:61, my emphasis). To this end, he argues that our lives are far worse than we delude ourselves into thinking, that this is in effect a "world of suffering" (Benatar 2006:88). To bolster this Schopenhauerian claim, Benatar (2006:88-92) paints a bleak picture of the vast numbers of people who suffer due to natural disasters, hunger and malnutrition, diseases, and the various harms people inflict upon each other: rape, assault, murder, genital mutilation, slavery, humiliation, etc.

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Despite the presence of great suffering in the world, many (if not most) persons seem to express a preference for existence, so to speak, and, despite the harms they and others suffer, appear to endorse their creation. Benatar is not surprised by the marked contrast between his "world of suffering" picture and the rosy, optimistic view of life most people seem to have. Our life-assessments are notoriously unreliable, he claims, because of built-in mechanisms that allow (most of) us to hide from ourselves just how bad our lives really are—and to him all lives are very bad.

For one thing, we all tend to be optimistic—often to quite an irrational degree. The so-called "Pollyanna Principle" (Benatar 2006:64) is the psychological phenomenon whereby we tend towards optimism rather than pessimism, oftentimes leading us to have very inaccurate representations of ourselves and the world. Another psychological phenomenon, "adaptation" (Benatar 2006:67), helps us cope with setbacks by allowing us to adjust our expectations to this (lowered) standard (Benatar 2006:67-9).

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Finally, Benatar notes that we often assess our wellbeing comparatively, that is, not according to the actual quality of our lives but relative to that of others (Benatar 2006:68). Crucially, this very often leads to shared negative features being left out of our life assessments (Benatar 2006:68). Benatar asserts that these three psychological mechanisms help people cope with, or even steadfastly deny, the fact that this is indeed a world of suffering.

Gerald Harrison

Similar to Benatar's first (that is, asymmetry) argument for anti-natalism, Gerald Harrison's argument also appeals to an asymmetry—not of pains and pleasures, however, but rather an asymmetry of duties. According to Harrison, duties require victims:

> One can only have a duty to do X, if failing to do X would wrong someone. In other words if one cannot identify someone who would be wronged by one's failure to fulfil the supposed prima facie duty, then the duty does not exist. (Harrison 2012:96)

Importantly, Harrison is appealing to W.D. Ross's notion of *prima facie* duties (Ross 1930). A "*prima facie* duty" here can be understood as an act that has the character of being obligatory, other things being equal, but which can be overridden by other considerations (Ross ([1930] 1988:19-20).[15] Harrison argues that we have *prima facie* duties, amongst other things, to prevent suffering and to promote pleasure. Clearly, according to this line of reasoning, we have a duty to avoid creating people who will suffer, as this would create victims. But there is also no duty to create happy people, because there would be no victims if we did not create these people. The duty to promote pleasure applies only to those who already exist.

[15] Harrison does not distinguish between "*prima facie* duties" and "*pro tanto* duties", though note that many scholars now agree that Ross probably should have used the latter term. For example, Shelly Kagan writes:

> A pro tanto reason has genuine weight, but nonetheless may be outweighed by other considerations. Thus, calling a reason a pro tanto reason is to be distinguished from calling it a prima facie reason, which I take to involve an epistemological qualification: a prima facie reason appears to be a reason, but may actually not be a reason at all. (Kagan 1989:17n)

When I refer to "*pro tanto*" or "*prima facie*" duties or reasons in this thesis, I intend for these terms to be understood according to something like Kagan's above distinction.

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A crucial difference between his view and Benatar's is that Harrison does not deny that we can benefit by creating. Harrison thus considers his route to anti-natalism to be simpler and less controversial than Benatar's, as it does not appeal to the unintuitive view that even those living largely pleasure-filled lives are always on balance harmed by their creation.[16] Furthermore, Harrison argues that he successfully avoids the charge of pro-mortalism that could be levelled against Benatar's arguments.[17]

In my attempts to defend procreation, I, too, make similar appeals to duty, though I deny that (all our) duties require victims in the event of non-performance. Briefly, I argue, *contra* Benatar, that we do indeed have a duty to prevent the extinction of the human race, and that we must weigh this up against our *pro tanto* duty to avoid harming any humans we might create. I show how this former duty is not merely a *prima facie* duty, but a *pro tanto* duty—and one that weighs heavily against any actions that might lead to human extinction.[18]

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Christopher Belshaw

An intriguing but neglected version of anti-natalism is offered by Christopher Belshaw (2012). Belshaw considers his argument to be more intuitive than Benatar's, and he also thinks it does a better job of avoiding pro-mortalism (at least insofar as [adult human] persons are concerned).[19] Belshaw starts by asking us to consider a

[16] I note here that Benatar thinks that, rather than being a standalone asymmetry-based argument, Harrison's anti-natalism relies on his more basic asymmetry of pleasure and pain. See Benatar (2012:160-162).

[17] Benatar himself denies that his arguments entail pro-mortalism—that is, roughly, the view that it would be better to die sooner rather than later, and that suicide is preferable to continued existence. See Benatar (2006:212-221). For an argument that Benatar's argument *does* entail pro-mortalism, see McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett (2012). For Benatar's response, see Benatar (2012:157-160).

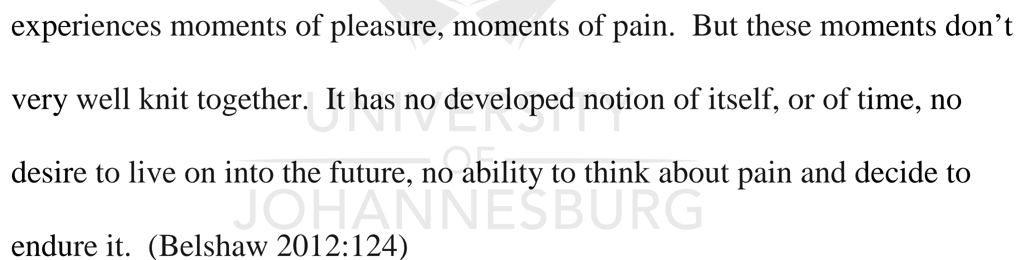
[18] See footnote 9, above.

[19] Benatar disagrees; he responds in Benatar (2012:162-163).

plausible picture of how a non-human animal might experience its existence. Unlike us, he claims, such a creature lacks a sophisticated conception of its identity over time. That is, an animal experiences life on a moment-by-moment basis. Whereas we can, and frequently do, opt to experience pain if and because it promises to benefit us later, future benefits cannot compensate for pain in this manner in animals. This is because animals "neither want to live on nor want those things that give them reason to live on", and they "don't desire the future to be a certain way, on condition that they live to see it" (Belshaw 2012:121).

Belshaw argues that human infants are similarly bereft of future-directed desires. As with animals, human infants experience life in the moment, as it were. A human infant

> experiences moments of pleasure, moments of pain. But these moments don't very well knit together. It has no developed notion of itself, or of time, no desire to live on into the future, no ability to think about pain and decide to endure it. (Belshaw 2012:124)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To be sure, infants do have the potential to grow into persons—that is, "rational self-conscious beings, aware of the distinctions between themselves and other beings, aware of their persisting through time" (Belshaw 2012:123). But they will first have to go through a very difficult period packed with non-trivial harms, as "[e]ven perfectly healthy babies come into the world screaming, cry a lot, suffer colic and teething pains, keep people awake at night" (Belshaw 2012:124). Is it permissible to bring a human child into existence if it means she will have to go through this period

where she will experience these non-trivial harms, and, further, will experience them in this disjointed, moment-by-moment basis? Belshaw answers in the negative.

Some of my arguments for the permissibility of procreation implicitly challenge some of Belshaw's inferences. I briefly note here that his line of reasoning has further interesting consequences that he does not consider. To my mind, Belshaw's analogy to animals can be extended to adult persons. For it is not uncommon for us to go through periods where our phenomenological experience of pain and pleasure is not all that different from the experiences of infants or non-human animals. Oftentimes, pain is so severe and long-lasting that it demands our immediate attention for extended periods of time. Consider how one's phenomenological experiences of time and identity might be altered immediately after an unfortunate encounter with a tarantula hawk—a species of wasp with a bite so painful, that an entomologist's actual advice to its unlucky victims is to "lay down and scream" (Schmidt 2004:405). This is because the pain from a single tarantula hawk bite

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> is so debilitating and excruciating that the victim is at risk of further injury by tripping in a hole or over an object in the path and falling onto a cactus or into a barbed wire fence. Such is the pain, that few, if any, can maintain normal coordination or cognitive control to prevent accidental injury. (Schmidt 2004:405)

I am, of course, being somewhat facetious by choosing this particular example. But my point could also be made by considering persons who suffer from chronic pain stemming from illness or injury, or those who must endure periods of intolerable

mental anguish due to conditions such as depression, bipolar mood disorder, or schizophrenia. Indeed, extremely painful experiences can be so negative that, even if they occur within an otherwise good and worthwhile life, they might make one hesitant to live one's life over again (a point explored in Blumenfeld 2009). But I leave this discussion here, as I consider the problem of pain more closely in Part Three.

2.2. Nihilistic motivations for anti-natalism

"Life stinks", opines Rivka Weinberg, but non-existence "is odor free" (Weinberg 2012:26).[20] Nihilistic versions of anti-natalism are motivated by the intuition (often accompanied by feelings of dread or horror) that all human lives are meaningless. And so, in *The Conspiracy against the Human Race* (2010), Thomas Ligotti paints a very bleak picture of suffering in the face of the "living horror" (2010:92) of human existence. Rather than offering a systematic argument for anti-natalism, his book surveys pessimistic and nihilistic views on human existence. The Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran features prominently. Cioran, too, did not offer a systematic defence of anti-natalism, but his writings are famous for their consistent pessimism, and he considered not having children to be one of the greatest achievements of his life (along with giving up smoking) (Ligotti 2010:102).

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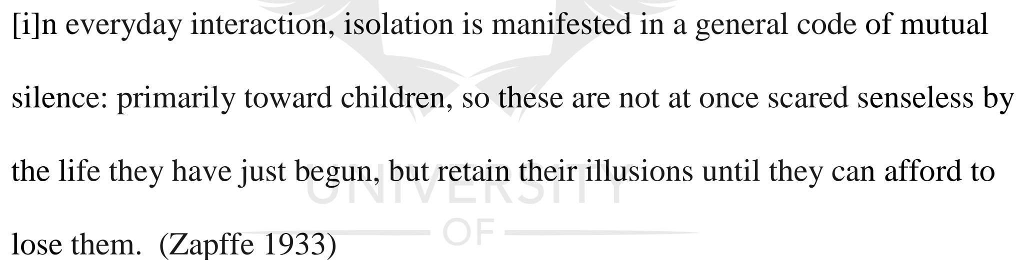
[20] Though perhaps not a full-blown nihilist, Weinberg nevertheless believes that the pain and suffering of life is not easily dismissed by optimistic appeals to meaning. Further, though she is sympathetic to anti-natalism, she argues against it (2012; 2016). I come back to some of her views later in this thesis.

Peter Wessel Zapffe argues that our intelligence is a great source of angst. With our overdeveloped intellects, we have become "a species […] armed too heavily", "a biological paradox, an abomination, an absurdity, an exaggeration of disastrous nature" (Zapffe 1933). Yet, despite cognition having "given us more than we can carry", only a few people commit suicide; most deal with the human condition by "learn[ing] to save themselves by artificially limiting the content of consciousness" (Zapffe 1933). By this, Zapffe means that most of us develop psychological methods of coping with an inherently frustrating human condition. For example, one of these methods is what Zapffe calls "isolation": "[the] fully arbitrary dismissal from consciousness of all disturbing and destructive thought and feeling" (Zapffe 1933). And so,



> [i]n everyday interaction, isolation is manifested in a general code of mutual silence: primarily toward children, so these are not at once scared senseless by the life they have just begun, but retain their illusions until they can afford to lose them. (Zapffe 1933)

In this thesis, I do not attempt to respond directly to nihilism as a philosophical outlook. I limit my response to matters relating to the morality of procreation, showing how human existence can indeed have meaning (from a kind of eternal perspective). Further, I argue that we need the promise of future generations to give our lives sufficient meaning.

2.3. Consent-based motivations for anti-natalism

Consent-based arguments for anti-natalism proceed from the intuition that it is morally problematic, and oftentimes morally wrong, to impose harms without consent—particularly if those harms are severe. And so, it is morally impermissible to procreate, because procreation involves exposing a nonconsenting patient to a non-trivial harm, where this harm is not intended to alleviate a greater harm. Seana Shiffrin (1999) offers the most systematic and well-known defence of this position.

Seana Shiffrin[21]

Benatar and Shiffrin both believe that the harms of existence are far from trivial. But unlike Benatar, who of course argues that creation results in a "net harm", Shiffrin believes that creating a person usually does provide an overall benefit to that person (Shiffrin 1999:136). Like Benatar, however, she believes that even though parents may benefit their offspring by creating them, they also impose "substantial burdens" (Shiffrin 1999:137) on them:

> By being caused to exist as persons, children are forced to assume moral agency, to face various demanding and sometimes wrenching moral questions, and to discharge taxing moral duties. They must endure the fairly substantial amount of pain, suffering, difficulty, significant disappointment, distress, and significant loss that occur within the typical life. They must face and undergo the fear and harm of death. Finally, they must bear the results of imposed risks that their lives may go terribly wrong in a variety of ways (Shiffrin 1999:137).

[21] This explication of Shiffrin's views borrows from Singh (2012a).

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And so, despite believing that procreation could very well result in an overall benefit to a child, procreation is morally problematic to Shiffrin because "[all] of these burdens are imposed *without the future child's consent*" (Shiffrin 1999:137, my emphasis).[22]

Shiffrin introduces a term, "pure benefit" (1999:124), that is important to fully understanding her position. She points out that we usually consider it morally permissible to harm a person without her consent in order to prevent a greater harm befalling her. However, we do not consider it morally permissible to harm an unconsenting person in order to secure her a greater *pure* benefit. Pure benefits impart (non-essential) improvements—for example, sensual pleasure or material enrichment—to our lives. Further, they do not derive their "beneficial" status from the removal or prevention of harm (Shiffrin 1999:124-5). And so, we would judge it wrong to break an unconsenting patient's arm for "supernormal memory, a useful store of encyclopaedic knowledge, twenty IQ points worth of extra intellectual ability, or the ability to consume immoderate amounts of alcohol or fat without side effects" (Shiffrin 1999:127).

In my thesis, I respond to this consent-based argument by saying that though we have duties of non-maleficence and respect for autonomy, they must be weighed up against our other duties. For one, we also have, I argue later in this thesis, a *pro tanto* duty to prevent the extinction of the human race. It is worth pointing out that, in taking this

[22] I offer a more detailed analysis of Shiffrin's views, specifically on how consent relates to anti-natalism, in Singh (2012b).

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route, I look beyond our (welfarist) duties to potential children (the focus of most anti-natal arguments).

2.4. Misanthropic motivations for anti-natalism

Most versions of anti-natalism appeal to the (expected) welfare of the child that one might conceive. These might be called "philanthropic" arguments for anti-natalism. But there also other, *misanthropic* rationales for anti-natalism (outlined in Benatar 2015; 2017). These appeal to the welfare of other people who might be affected by the creation of more human beings. But perhaps the stronger thread of the misanthropic argument for anti-natalism garners support from the indisputable threat human existence poses to the environment and non-human species. Benatar (2017) remarks that "[i]f any other species caused as much damage as humans do, we would think it wrong to breed new members of that species" (Benatar 2017:[no page numbers]).

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On this line of reasoning, our extinction would arguably be good, because human existence seriously threatens the survival of the millions of non-human species on earth. This is the stance taken by the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), an anti-natal group that advocates the extinction of the human race for both philanthropic and (though they may challenge the use of this term) misanthropic reasons.[23] In terms of the latter, according to the VHEMT website, "[…] the *hopeful alternative* to the extinction of millions of species of plants and animals is the

[23] According to their website, they are "[…] not just a bunch of misanthropes and anti-social, Malthusian misfits, taking morbid delight whenever disaster strikes humans" (VHEMT [no date]).

voluntary extinction of one species: Homo sapiens […]" (VHEMT [no date; no page numbers]; my emphasis). Similar intuitions are expressed by Gerald Harrison and Julia Tanner:

> If one thinks that species in themselves have value, and if one is serious about preserving species, then the demise of the human species looks as if it should be welcomed. (Harrison & Tanner 2011:115)

What is remarkable about this version of anti-natalism is that it appeals to the intuition that there is some inherent worth to species that deserves protection (from annihilation), whilst also apparently denying this value to the *human* species. To be sure, human activity has indeed had a devastating impact upon other species (and the planet), and misanthropic anti-natalism challenges us to rationally reflect upon this. But when there is conflict between species, and our intuition is that in most cases human beings ought to win out, how might we defend this position? In my thesis, I appeal to a rehabilitated version of the concept of dignity as a way to resolve this conflict. The anti-natalist denies that there is some superlative value to the human species that would make our extinction a bad thing, but I show how human dignity can help us see why this view is in error.

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Part One

Anti-natalism and dignity

3. Dignity is dying: resuscitating a "useless" concept

> That faint light in each of us which dates back to before our birth, to before all births, is what must be protected if we want to rejoin that remote glory from which we shall never know why we were separated.
>
> Emil Cioran (*The Trouble With Being Born*)[24]

3.1. Overview

In the previous chapter, I looked at various rationales for anti-natalism. Recall that my strategy in this thesis is to assume, for the sake of argument, that anti-natalism is probably true—that is, I assume the anti-natalist is correct in concluding that it is (almost) always wrong, on welfarist grounds, to create new people. But this need not be the end of the debate. For it may be that creating new people is merely *pro tanto* wrong, and that factors anti-natalism does not consider could yet render at least some instances of procreation permissible. For one thing, there is a line of argument that can be explored which defends procreation from the perspective of human dignity. Again, this potential route to a pro-natal conclusion has been suggested in the literature—to some degree by Spurrett (2011:203) and, more explicitly, by Metz (2012a:8-9)—but it has yet to be thoroughly explored. It is to this task that I now turn.

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[24] Cioran (1976:151).

In this part of my thesis, I examine whether it is permissible to procreate insofar as it respects human dignity by aiming to prevent or forestall human extinction**.** Dignity can be understood as a superlative, intrinsic value worthy of respect. Recall from my introductory chapter that anti-natalism seems, for one thing, to disrespect the (assumed) intrinsic value of the species. As I mentioned there, Benatar adopts a welfare-based approach to ethics, and he thus takes reducing harm to be an ultimate good.[25] Controversially, though, this welfarist approach leads him to endorse human extinction (which would eradicate all harm). However, a dignity-based approach to ethics is not reducible to considerations of harm, and this sort of (non-welfarist) approach might prohibit us from allowing the human race to go extinct. This is so, because such an ethics would require us to respect beings with dignity, namely humans, and failing to prevent the extinction of human beings would arguably be a failure in our duty to respect human dignity.

Though this line of argument looks promising, in order for its defence to even get off the ground, I first have to deal with serious criticisms that have been laid against the concept of dignity in recent years. Critics of dignity, such as Ruth Macklin and Steven Pinker, argue that it is a vague or effectively superfluous concept that can be jettisoned with no loss to bioethics. They further assert that friends of dignity, such as Leon Kass and Michael Sandel, use the term in imprecise ways, or imbue it with too great a normative significance. Part of my task here is thus to reassert the value of the concept of dignity.

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[25] Though he does at times appeal to the Kantian injunction against treating people as mere means (most clearly in Benatar 2006:128-131).

To this end, I borrow upon recent attempts to revise the concept to sketch a new version of dignity, one that both avoids these criticisms and helps object to the anti-natalist. According to this new version, what gives a person dignity is her very capacity to value—or, more precisely, her quintessentially human capacity to *care* about value. I show how this capacity is distinct from autonomy or the ability to reason—or, indeed, our mere nature as a member of the human species, which Kass believes grounds dignity.[26] Furthermore, I demonstrate how this new version reasserts the relevance of dignity to bioethics as a concept that is distinct from respect for persons. Most crucially for my thesis, I argue that this new version of dignity could play a part in defending procreation.

I employ this new version to argue that if what gives us a dignity is our capacity to care about value, then this helps motivate a *pro tanto* prohibition against allowing the human race to go extinct. This is primarily because Benatar's "solution" of extinction is effectively a moral prescription we as creatures who (should) care about value cannot bring ourselves to implement, and is thus no solution at all to the problem of human suffering. While this is not quite a full-blown pro-natal conclusion, I argue that dignity—especially if taken in conjunction with transhumanism and the role meaning plays in our lives—offers a way to object to a thoroughgoing anti-natalism.

Note again that I do not seek to answer the question as to whether anti-natalism disrespects the dignity of would-be parents by forbidding their procreative wishes. Rather, I look at whether there is in fact some intrinsic value—that is, a "dignity"—to

[26] For example, Kass (1972:23) asserts that "[m]an is partly defined by his origins; to be bound up with parents, siblings, ancestors, is part of what we mean by 'human'". In the main text, I sketch a version of dignity that denies the necessity of this link to species membership.

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characteristic members of the human species, such that allowing people to go extinct would be wrong. Here, I am more careful than either Macklin or Pinker in my examination of the widespread popularity of dignity, offering reasons for *why* most people intuitively perceive themselves and others to have a dignity. Further, I argue that the *fact* that we appear to unavoidably have "dignity" as a normative category of perception is morally significant.

Finally, though I associate human dignity with the capacity to *care* about value, I am not, strictly speaking, forwarding an argument from within the ethical theory known as "care ethics", or "the ethics of care"—the proposed alternative to the traditional triumvirate of deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics perspectives. Though I might, on the face of it, appear to dip into care ethics literature, my defence of dignity as a pro-natal objection would find a more natural home in virtue ethics and deontology. Further, care ethics focuses on caring about others, whereas I focus on caring *simpliciter*.

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I divide this part of my thesis into six chapters. In the first chapter (Chapter 3 of this thesis), I offer a brief overview of the concept of dignity. In addition, I discuss the most salient objections to the continued use of the concept of dignity in bioethics, as well as responses in the literature to these objections. Here, I take Macklin's and Pinker's objections to dignity to be paradigmatic, and a) show why these objections fail to prove that the concept of dignity ought to be abandoned, but b) concede that the concept of dignity is nevertheless in need of more careful exposition (I provide such an exposition in the third chapter). Note that, in this part of my thesis, I discuss only criticisms of the coherence or usefulness of the concept of dignity, not criticisms of

how the concept is (or ought to be) applied to ethical debates around issues such as radical human enhancement—a project I take up later in the part of my thesis devoted to examining anti-natalism via the lens of transhumanism.[27]

In the second chapter (Chapter 4), I propose a new version of human dignity, according to which our dignity is underwritten not by rationality or autonomy, but by the capacity to care about value—or, to be more precise, a certain cluster of values. I intend to offer only a preliminary sketch of this new version of dignity—enough to make a case against anti-natalism—as a complete exposition would require a thesis-length defence. I ground my new version of dignity in the literature by examining attempts in the literature to revise the concept of dignity. Here, I focus chiefly on the views of Thomas Christiano, Agnieszka Jaworska, and Charles Foster. These authors all consider dignity to be conceptually distinct from autonomy, as I do.

In the third chapter (Chapter 5), I strengthen the new version of dignity sketched in the previous chapter by showing how it underwrites many of our moral intuitions. I defend two major claims—namely, an ethics without dignity is arguably undetermined (5.2.), and dignity arguably creates (in some major respects) the conditions for the possibility of being moral (5.3.). In the fourth chapter (Chapter 6), I forward and respond to possible criticisms of the new understanding I have advanced.

The next chapter (Chapter 7) I apply this new version of dignity to the natal debate. I first argue, *contra* Benatar that there is indeed a badness to human extinction (7.2.).

[27] The insights gleaned into dignity in the current part of this thesis help illuminate that later discussion.

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Second, I show how our duties toward the world and toward ourselves demand that we avoid extinction (7.3.). Chiefly, I argue that we must assign a dignity to ourselves, and that this logically entails that we may not purposefully go extinct.

In the sixth and final chapter (Chapter 8), I again use dignity to argue against extinction, but take a different route. Chiefly, I argue that as beings with a dignity—properly understood (for us as humans) as *beings with the capacity to care about a certain cluster of values*—it is not reasonable to ask us to follow a moral prescription (namely, one that will lead to our extinction) that so deeply and profoundly unsettles us.[28] One way to defend this view might be to appeal to the principle of "ought implies can", saying that creatures such as ourselves literally cannot follow anti-natalism to its logical end (that is, extinction). Though I do indeed make some reference to this principle, I do not intend to argue for the strong view just outlined.[29] Instead, I attempt only to demonstrate that a thoroughgoing anti-natalism is ultimately *too morally demanding*. Here, the reader may keep in mind familiar arguments against utilitarianism (and other ethical views) as too morally demanding.

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However, I conclude that dignity alone will not get us to pro-natalism, as our duties to prevent human extinction and prevent human suffering are in tension. Thus, even my revised version of dignity is not sufficient to defend individual acts of procreation (in

[28] As I discuss further in the main text, I am not here talking about individual acts of procreation in contemporary times. Many people decide not to have children, so it is of course possible to decide to remain childless. But consider a point in time when humanity is at the precipice of extinction, and procreation is urgently required in order to keep our species from rapidly disappearing. In *such* a scenario, would anti-natalism not strike most people as a moral prescription that is impossible to follow? We are beings, I argue, with a uniquely calibrated orientation toward value, and this is what gives us a dignity. The loss of the things we value, for instance, has the potential to stir up extreme emotional responses.

[29] Though I think this strong view is worthy of consideration, I am sceptical as to whether it can be defended.

scenarios where there is no immediate threat of extinction, at least); it only gives us enough to defend a general prescription against allowing humanity to go extinct. But this is nevertheless a significant first step toward mounting a more conclusive defence of procreation against Benatar's thoroughgoing anti-natalism, and in the second and third parts of this thesis, I show how this first step can be built upon.

3.2. Dignity: an overview and review of its significance for anti-natalism

Dignity has a long history, but the concept first started to become ubiquitous in 20th century moral thought, appearing in such preeminent documents as the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). Its inclusion in this landmark document represented a significant historical milestone in the history of the concept (McCrudden 2008:656). Dignity also features prominently in The South African Constitution and Bill of Rights (1996). And famously, Article 1 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, adopted in 1969, reads: "Human dignity shall be inviolable" (2014:15). Even now, as we find ourselves well into the 21st century, the popularity of dignity shows no signs of waning (at least, outside of academia). As a case in point, in 2002, the US President's Council on Bioethics, appointed by President George W Bush, chose to issue its controversial first report under the title, *Human Cloning and Human Dignity*.[30]

However, as I discuss below, despite the long history of the concept, a precise definition of what dignity *is* has proved elusive. Having said that, dignity is often

[30] And, by the time you read this, Dear Reviewer, I will have presented at a conference on the future of human dignity.

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taken to be a superlative (moral) worth or value that calls for respect. Human beings, or so the argument goes, have an inviolable value, and thus a dignity. Perhaps the most influential treatment of what *gives* us a dignity comes from Immanuel Kant.

To Kant, every rational human being is an end in itself, and such a being cannot be bought and sold like a mere commodity. In Kant's own words:

> In the realm of ends everything has either a **price** or a **dignity**. What has a price is such that something else can also be put in its place as its *equivalent*; by contrast, that which is elevated above all price, and admits of no equivalent, has a dignity. (*Ak* 4:434; emphases in original)[31]

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As ends in themselves, rational human beings, unlike any other creature, have "an absolute inner worth" (*Ak*. 6:435)—that is, a dignity. For Kant, what gives us this inner worth, and thus a dignity, is our capacity to self-legislate. We have the ability to set ends that are the product solely of our reasoning, and have none of their source from nature. Choosing our own ends in a consistently moral fashion, however, requires rational deliberation:

> Now, morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends. Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity. (*Ak.* 4:434-435)

[31] All in-text references are to the Academy Edition (*Akademie*—"*Ak.*") of Kant's texts.

Kant's ideas about what gives us a dignity have proven to be both extremely influential as well as heavily contested. For, in grounding human dignity in concepts like rationality and autonomy,[32] Kant (or at least dominant interpretations of Kant) obfuscates rather than illuminates the idea of dignity. Below, I discuss objections to the concept.

3.3. Objections to dignity

If its critics are right, dignity faces an uphill battle for legitimacy in contemporary debates. Dignity is an ambiguous concept, with a single clear meaning seemingly hard to come by. In addition, friends of dignity sometimes seem to wield the concept as though it represents a sort of conversation-stopping, knock-down argument. What is more, dignity is often used to argue for opposing positions, leading some critics to assert that it is ultimately an empty concept.

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Indeed, this charge of vacuity is a recurring criticism of the manner in which dignity is used in bioethics. Even friends of dignity, such as Christopher McCrudden, have observed that dignity often serves as a mere "placeholder" with no immediately evident moral foundation (McCrudden 2013:2). In the same vein, Arthur Schopenhauer had this to say about (Kantian) dignity:

> This expression 'Human Dignity', once it was uttered by Kant, became the shibboleth of all perplexed and empty-headed moralists. For behind that

[32] "*Autonomy* is thus the ground of the dignity of the human and of every rational nature" (*Ak.* 4:436; emphasis in original).

> imposing formula they concealed their lack, not to say, of a real ethical basis, but of any basis at all which was possessed of an intelligible meaning; supposing cleverly enough that their readers would be so pleased to see themselves invested with such a 'dignity' that they would be quite satisfied. (Schopenhauer 1903 [1837]:101)

In this chapter, I discuss the arguments of two of the most influential critics of dignity, namely Ruth Macklin and Steven Pinker, as well as salient objections to their views. Along with Macklin's and Pinker's opponents, I argue that there is much more to be said about the concept of dignity. To this end, I conclude this chapter by offering strong reasons in support of the view that dignity's persistence as a moral category shows we need to invoke the concept in order to make sense of moral judgments.

Note that my primary aim in this chapter is to lay out responses to Macklin and Pinker in a manner that demonstrates that they have been premature to suggest that the concept be abandoned. I offer my own evaluation of their arguments in the next chapter.

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3.3.1. Macklin

In a terse polemic, Ruth Macklin (in)famously argues that dignity is "a useless concept" (2003:1419). She maintains that it means nothing more than respect for persons or autonomy, and that it can be jettisoned "with no loss to medical ethics" (and, presumably, ethics as a whole) (Macklin 2003:1419, 1420). Observing how

friends of dignity use the concept in, to her mind, "hopelessly vague" ways, Macklin opines that "to invoke the concept of dignity without clarifying its meaning is to use a mere slogan" (2003:1420).[33]

3.3.1.1. Responses to Macklin: Schroeder

Doris Schroeder argues that Macklin addresses only the Kantian conception of dignity, when there are in fact four distinct conceptions (though she calls them "concepts") of dignity to be considered (Schroeder 2008:232). Dignity, Schroeder asserts, is inescapably "multifaceted" (2008:232). Unlike Macklin, Schroeder views dignity as more than respect for autonomy, and, further, she does not see the absence of a single definition of dignity to be a shortcoming of the concept in terms of its ability to contribute to current and future debates (Schroeder 2008:236-237). According to Schroeder's taxonomy, there is "Kantian dignity", "Aristocratic dignity", "comportment dignity", and "meritorious dignity". I discuss these four conceptions in turn.

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First, Schroeder acknowledges that her definition of "Kantian dignity" differs somewhat from how Kant views human dignity. Schroeder does not strictly associate dignity with rationality, as Kant does, choosing instead to offer an updated definition more in line with the spirit of dignity (as a universal and inviolable quality or value) evident in contemporary international laws and national constitutions (Schroeder 2008:233). Noting how we now tend to consider *all* human beings as possessing

[33] Note Schopenhauer's similar charge of vacuity, quoted above (in the main text).

dignity, Schroeder, de-emphasising rationality, describes "'Kantian' dignity" in the following terms: "Dignity is an inviolable property of all human beings, which gives the possessor the right never to be treated simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (2008:233).

Second, "Aristocratic dignity" is derived from the idea of premodern societies that were divided by rank. In contrast to the Kantian notion of every (rational) individual possessing an inviolable value, in such "stratified" premodern societies, higher ranked individuals acting in ways befitting their station were seen as having greater value (2008:233). Schroeder (2008:233) thus defines Aristocratic dignity as follows: "Dignity is the outwardly displayed quality of a human being who acts in accordance with her superior rank and position."

Third, "comportment dignity" refers to the manner in which people (regardless of rank) conduct themselves in public. Rules for "dignified" behaviour varies, of course, from society to society. Schroeder (2008:234) defines this concept of dignity as follows: "Dignity is the outwardly displayed quality of a human being who acts in accordance with society's expectations of well-mannered demeanor and bearing."

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Lastly, it is one thing to merely *display* dignity, and another thing to *deserve* it. This is where "meritorious dignity" comes in. Schroeder (2008:234) links this concept of dignity to Aristotle's four cardinal virtues of temperance, courage, justice and wisdom. To be dignified, according to this understanding of the term, is to display the cardinal virtues, and to face life's challenges with equanimity. Schroeder defines

meritorious dignity as follows: "Dignity is a virtue, which subsumes the four cardinal virtues and one's sense of self-worth" (2008:235).

What this discussion of Schroeder's views highlights is that the multiple meanings of dignity ought not to be viewed as reason to jettison the concept. There is more to the concept of dignity than Macklin acknowledges. Below, I lay out more reasons not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, as it were—reasons that help us get closer to the version of dignity I ultimately defend in this chapter.

3.3.1.2. Responses to Macklin: Killmister

Suzy Killmister thinks that Schroeder's critique of Macklin can be taken even further. She argues that Schroeder's four concepts ought to be united under "a single conceptual link that ties together the various values flying under its banner" (Killmister 2010:160). What is this conceptual link? To Killmister, dignity ought to be understood as the capacity to live by one's standards and principles (2010:163).

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Killmister begins her exposition of this single overarching principle by distilling Schroeder's four categories into two. Dignity, she says, is used in two related ways in bioethics. The first sense in which dignity is used is synonymous with autonomy. Macklin is thus not entirely wrong to identify dignity with respect for autonomy. What Macklin fails to do, however, is to recognise that there is a second understanding of dignity. According to this second, "thicker" definition, "[dignity is] more closely tied to relational issues of upholding personal standards and avoiding humiliation" (Killmister 2010:160).

In terms of the first sense of dignity, Killmister (2010:160) has in mind what Schroeder describes as the "Kantian" concept of dignity—namely, dignity as an inalienable and inviolable status possessed by all human beings. The second sense, on the other hand, incorporates both comportment and meritorious dignity (Killmister 2010:161). Killmister (2010:161) makes no room for aristocratic dignity in her schema, saying that it is of little relevance in modern times, and of even less relevance to medical ethics.

Killmister collapses comportment and meritorious dignity into one category—"aspirational dignity"—in the following manner. She advises us to view comportment dignity as "less as an upholding of *external* standards and norms, and more as the upholding of one's *own* standards and norms" (Killmister 2010:61). By bringing the definition of comportment dignity closer to that of meritorious dignity, we arrive at "aspirational dignity", which is "the quality held by individuals who are living in accordance with their principles" (Killmister 2010:161).

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Killmister argues that understanding dignity in this way also explains how a status that is supposedly inviolable (according to the Kantian account) can be injured or lost. This is because whilst dignity in the Kantian sense is possessed by all human beings, we can lose aspirational dignity, or be stripped of it via circumstances, our own actions, or the actions of others (Killmister 2010:161). In fact, Killmister notes that:

> [t]he rapid responses to Macklin's paper were replete with examples from medical practitioners of situations that they saw as paradigmatically dignity compromising, and which they felt Macklin's collapsing of dignity into

> autonomy failed to capture. Importantly, many of these responders made reference, either explicitly or implicitly, to the notion of shame or humiliation. In particular, it was shame or humiliation experienced through the inability to uphold personal standards. (Killmister 2010:161)

Note here Killmister's emphasis on the fact that people can feel shame and humiliation when it is not possible to for them to uphold their personal standards (as in the case of torture, for example). Note, also, her suggestion that recognition of the moral significance of this emotional reaction is essential to reaching a fuller understanding of human dignity. These points are of vital significance to the new version of dignity I sketch later. This new version is compatible with the aspirational sense of dignity Killmister discusses, but goes further by explaining *why* a perceived loss of "dignity" can cause a person to experience shame or humiliation. Briefly, the answer lies in the relationship human beings have to value.

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A problem with the idea of aspirational dignity is that it could involve pleas, on the grounds that to do otherwise would be to violate human dignity, to respect personal standards an individual has in fact never displayed: "If I have never demonstrated courageousness," Killmister asks, "how could any conditions at the end of my life be wrong on the grounds that they impede my courage?" (2010:163). To get around this problem, Killmister advises that we combine Kantian and aspirational dignity, in order that we may see dignity as a *capacity* as opposed to an *ability*; the former can be latent but unrealised, as when an infant has the capacity for language acquisition, but has not yet developed the ability to realise that capacity (Killmister 2010:163):

> To see dignity as the capacity for principled action, therefore, is to recognise that there is a latent potential in all persons so to act. Even if events make an instance of virtue impossible—an individual does not have the ability to remain courageous under conditions of torture, for example, or to uphold their standards of personal hygiene in substandard hospital care—their capacity remains intact. (Killmister 2010:163)

Autonomy and dignity are thus conceptually distinct, according to Killmister. Therefore, respecting a person's autonomy or dignity each call for different approaches. Respecting a person's autonomy can be thought of as respect for her capacity for self-governance. Respecting her dignity, on the other hand, calls for respect for her self-worth (Killmister 2010:164).

My own view on the above distinction is that Killmister is probably correct in drawing something like it. I wonder, though, if the distinction collapses more often than Killmister might realise. For example, it is possible for a person to closely identify her capacity for self-governance with her sense of self-worth; and so, injuries to the former affect the latter, and are thus experienced by her as a loss of dignity. It seems to me that there is yet a deeper (that is, thicker) understanding of dignity to be brought out here—one that goes beyond the Kantian privileging of autonomy, but which nevertheless incorporates the important points Killmister raises about the close identification between a person's ability to uphold her values and her sense of self-worth. I briefly outline responses to Pinker's critique of dignity before offering my own understanding of dignity.

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3.3.2. Responses to Pinker

Steven Pinker considers dignity to be "a squishy, subjective notion, hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands assigned to it" (2008).[34] Like Macklin, Pinker does not see the need for dignity as a category distinct from autonomy or respect for persons: "[…] because it amounts to treating people in the way that they wish to be treated, ultimately it's just another application of the principle of autonomy" (Pinker 2008).

Pinker regards many of the appeals to "dignity" in bioethics to be motivated by religious sentiments. He is explicit in his disapproval of this, asking:

> How did the United States, the world's scientific powerhouse, reach a point at which it grapples with the ethical challenges of twenty-first-century biomedicine using Bible stories, Catholic doctrine, and woolly rabbinical allegory? (Pinker 2008)

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In particular, Pinker is displeased with the "pervasive Catholic flavouring" of the President's Council on Bioethics, created in 2001 by George W. Bush, and the Council's 555-page collection of essays entitled *Human Dignity and Bioethics* (2008). Aside from these concerns regarding the conservative motivations of some friends of dignity (which I shall not go into), Pinker has three further criticisms of the concept. First, dignity is relative, in the sense that what is viewed as dignified by one person or culture in one place or time might shock others elsewhere. "We chuckle," he writes,

[34] I refer to the online edition of Pinker's article; there are therefore no page numbers.

"[…] at the Brahmins and patriarchs of countless societies who consider it beneath their dignity to pick up a dish or play with a child" (Pinker 2008).

Second, dignity is "fungible", in the sense that we all choose to give it up in exchange for other goods. Pinker points out that though the Council and the Vatican consider dignity to be a sacred value, we often voluntarily suffer indignities such as getting out of small cars, or having sex.[35] As a less curious example, Pinker reminds us that modern medicine is "a gantlet of indignities", featuring voluntary violations such as colonoscopies, and pelvic or rectal examinations (Pinker 2008). Thus, though the Council and the Vatican consider dignity to be a sacred inviolable value, our actions frequently demonstrate that it is to most of us "a trivial value, well worth trading off for life, health, and safety" (Pinker 2008).

Third, and more seriously, Pinker argues that dignity can be harmful. Here he appeals to the tragically effective use of "ostentatious displays of dignity" by despotic leaders and others to motivate their followers into violence:

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> Political and religious repressions are often rationalized as a defense of the dignity of a state, leader, or creed: Just think of the Salman Rushdie fatwa, the Danish cartoon riots, or the British schoolteacher in Sudan who faced flogging and a lynch mob because her class named a teddy bear Mohammed. Indeed, totalitarianism is often the imposition of a leader's conception of dignity on a population, such as the identical uniforms in Maoist China or the burqas of the Taliban. (Pinker 2008)

[35] These are all Pinker's examples.

Like Schroeder and Killmister, Christopher Kaczor, too, argues that there is more to dignity than autonomy.[36] He goes even further, arguing that

> the concept of dignity does a better job than the concept of autonomy in describing and accounting for the intrinsic value of every human being. We are valuable not simply because of our choices, nor do we have value only while we are exercising our autonomy. We have value when we cannot choose due to temporary or even permanent disability. (Kaczor 2013:6)

Kaczor also argues that Pinker fails to recognise that the concept of autonomy also runs afoul of the charges of relativism, fungibility, and harmfulness (2013:2-4). Further, he argues that dignity is not the only term "dignity" that is used ambiguously in bioethics; "autonomy" too has various meanings—for example:

> autonomy as any self-initiated action, autonomy as informed consent, autonomy as the law of practical reason shared by all rational beings, autonomy as control, [and] autonomy as authenticity … [Ambiguous usage] is not sufficient reason to dismiss [a term] entirely or to prejudicially abandon attempts at disambiguation. (Kaczor 2013:4-5)

In order to further defend the concept of dignity against the charge of ambiguity, Kaczor appeals to Daniel P. Sulmasy's taxonomy of dignity (2008). Like Schroeder and Killmister, Sulmasy argues that dignity is best understood in light of its multiple

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[36] I should note that, as Catholic ethicists, Christopher Kaczor and Daniel P. Sulmasy (whose views I discuss shortly in the main text), have other responses that rely on contested distinctions.

possible meanings. Sulmasy lists three conceptions of dignity: "attributed dignity", "intrinsic dignity", and "inflorescent dignity" (2008:473-474)—the last of which can be understood as "dignity as flourishing" (Kaczor 2013:4). Kaczor is of the view that

> [t]his simple, threefold disambiguation resolves the alleged contradiction of meaning claimed by Pinker. Slavery and degradation are morally wrong because they undermine someone's dignity as flourishing. However, nothing you can do to a person, including enslaving or degrading him, can take away his intrinsic dignity. Dignity as attributed reflects excellence, striving, and conscience, such that only some people achieve it by dint of effort and character. Everyone, no matter how lazy, evil, or mentally impaired, has intrinsic dignity in full measure, but not dignity as flourishing or as attributed. Once the three senses of dignity are distinguished, the concerns about ambiguity expressed by Pinker no longer obtain. (Kaczor 2013:6)

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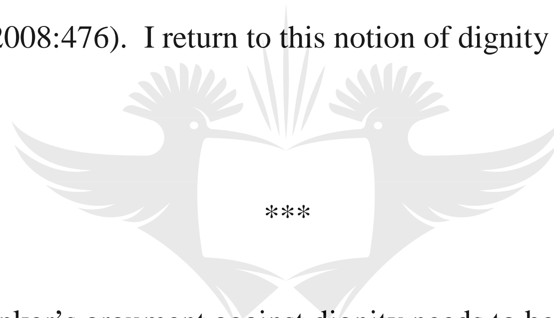
Note the similarities between Kantian dignity, as described by Schroeder and Killmister, and Sulmasy's "dignity as intrinsic worth". Essentially, the shared principle here is that dignity has an inviolable aspect to it. "Attributed dignity",[37] on the other hand, can be lost, and refers to the value individuals confer on others or on

[37] "By attributed dignity, I mean that worth or value that human beings confer upon others by acts of attribution. The act of conferring this worth or value may be accomplished individually or communally, but it always involves a choice. Attributed dignity is, in a sense, created. It constitutes a conventional form of value. Thus, we attribute worth or value to those we consider to be dignitaries, those we admire, those who carry themselves in a particular way, or those who have certain talents, skills, or powers. We can even attribute worth or value to ourselves using this word. The Hobbesian notion of dignity is attributed" (Sulmasy 2008:473).
"Attributed value", for Sulmasy (2002:105), refers to the value only a valuer can attribute to something. He contrasts (2002:105) attributed value with intrinsic value, as opposed to the classical distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value.

themselves (Kaczor 2013:5). It seems to me that this shares many of the features of Schroeder's comportment and meritorious dignity.

However, "Dignity as flourishing", as I read it, is similar to, but goes further than, Killmister's final sense of aspirational dignity. It does so by prescribing what might be called a teleology to human flourishing, and thus to human dignity. To see why I say this, consider that Sulmasy also refers to "dignity as flourishing" as "inflorescent dignity", and defines it as "[a term that] refers to a variety of states of affairs in which a member of a natural kind that has intrinsic dignity is flourishing as the kind of thing that it is" (Sulmasy 2008:476). I return to this notion of dignity as flourishing later in this chapter.



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One last aspect of Pinker's argument against dignity needs to be more closely examined. Having come out harshly against the concept, Pinker still sees some moral significance to dignity. He correctly points out that it is "a phenomenon of human perception", one in which "[c]ertain signals from the world trigger an attribution in the mind of a perceiver" (Pinker 2008). Further,

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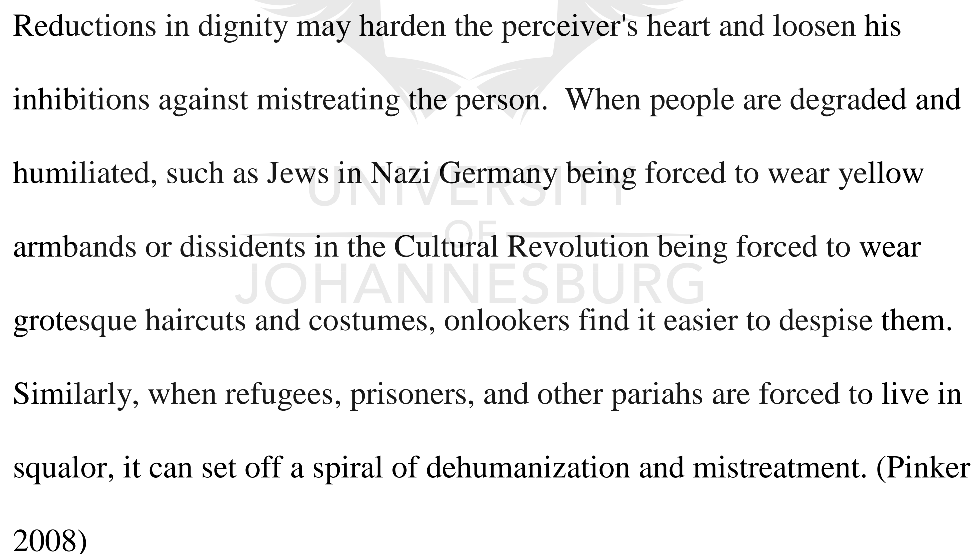
> [t]he perception of dignity in turn elicits a response in the perceiver. Just as the smell of baking bread triggers a desire to eat it, and the sight of a baby's face triggers a desire to protect it, the appearance of dignity triggers a desire to esteem and respect the dignified person. (Pinker 2008)

According to Pinker, this explains why dignity is morally significant. "We should not ignore," he says, "a phenomenon that causes one person to respect the rights and interests of another" (Pinker 2008). However, he then goes on to say that dignity is "skin-deep"—dignity is "the sizzle, not the steak; the cover, not the book" (Pinker 2008). Respect for the person is what is ultimately important, "not the perceptual signals that typically trigger it" (Pinker 2008).

But what does "respect for the person" mean here? Pinker immediately follows this thought by saying that people want to be seen as dignified. Further, he associates, as does Killmister, "reductions in dignity" with degradation and humiliation (Pinker 2008):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> Reductions in dignity may harden the perceiver's heart and loosen his inhibitions against mistreating the person. When people are degraded and humiliated, such as Jews in Nazi Germany being forced to wear yellow armbands or dissidents in the Cultural Revolution being forced to wear grotesque haircuts and costumes, onlookers find it easier to despise them. Similarly, when refugees, prisoners, and other pariahs are forced to live in squalor, it can set off a spiral of dehumanization and mistreatment. (Pinker 2008)

But it is unclear what sort of understanding of dignity Pinker is relying on here. As I read him, it seems as though Pinker wants to say that there is no intrinsic badness to degradation and humiliation—that the *real* harm occurs when *others* see this and fail to respect the autonomy of the degraded and humiliated person (Pinker 2008). This

doesn't ring true to me. Why not, at the very least, concede that there is some inherent badness to humiliation, or to humiliation at its most destructive (and Pinker in fact does use this word)—*dehumanization*?

I submit that in order to understand the concept of dehumanization, one has to also have some understanding of the normative concept of dignity, and to understand it as distinct from autonomy or respect for persons. Further, it does not ring true to call a person's sense of being dehumanized—an experience most people would describe as a profound loss of *dignity*—as nothing more than "skin-deep".

But Pinker (2008) insists that "even though breaches of dignity lead to an identifiable harm, it's ultimately autonomy and respect for persons that gives us the grounds for condemning it". I find Kaczor more convincing when he says that "the concept of dignity does a better job than autonomy in describing and accounting for the intrinsic value of every human being" (Kaczor 2013:6). Of course, though, Kaczor begs the question against dignity's critics, for this notion of intrinsic value is precisely what is being denied. Dignity's critics deny that every human being has some sort of mysterious intrinsic value. However, I believe that it is not possible to truly abandon this notion of intrinsic value—that is, the concept of human dignity. Even Pinker unwittingly appeals to our capacity to recognise it. Dignity, I argue, has a distinctively human fingerprint—one characterised by our capacity to care about certain values.

I have discussed various types of dignity in the preceding pages. The authors have touched upon *features* of dignity that are important, such as dignity's relation to

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shame, humiliation, and self-worth. Shortly, I bring these features together into a substantive conception of dignity.

At this point, I trust that I have convinced the reader that there is more to be said about dignity, and that the following summary of my response to critics of the concept will suffice, for now: The intuition that we have a dignity (distinct from autonomy) should not go away, since it is essential to make sense of key aspects of our moral lives. We thus ought to examine it even closer, as the criticisms of dignity seem to apply primarily to how the intuition is described—namely, in a Kantian, dignity-as-autonomy sense. Though, as I discuss below, I work with something close to that sense (the highest final value), I do not think that our dignity is best grounded in autonomy. And, like Schroeder and Killmister, I submit that instead of assuming that the intuition that human beings have a dignity (as distinct from autonomy) is faulty or of no moral significance, it is rather the Kantian appraisal of dignity that ought to be reconsidered.

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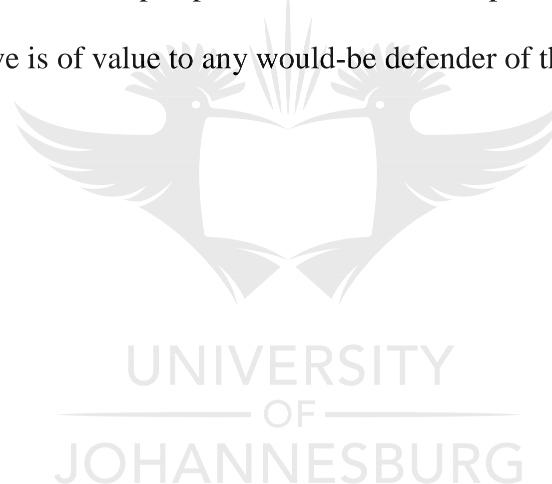
Consider the fact that even Pinker, in a harsh critique of the concept of dignity, cannot coherently dismiss the importance of the concept to ordinary people. Charles Foster (2011) notes the intuitiveness of dignity to non-academics:

> When we listen to [what ordinary people say about dignity], we might wonder whether there is any point in reading philosophy at university. They artlessly intuit everything that the dignity-sages have said … [The ordinary person] can tell us something that it is easy to miss when we [academics] read Kant. It's there in him, and in all the other great thinkers, but sometimes their sheer

> cleverness covers it up. It is, very simply, that the business of dignity is about being human, and being human well. (Foster 2011:81)

I agree that there is more to dignity than respect for autonomy, but the fact that dignity is open to multiple meanings motivates its opponents to argue *against* it. For example, note that Andrea Palk (2015) utilises Schroeder's taxonomy of dignity to argue that this plurality of meanings gives us reason to abandon the concept. I suggest that friends of dignity would benefit from a description of a single perspective that I suspect underwrites many, if not all, ascriptions of human dignity.[38] I believe that I offer a decent stab at this perspective later in this chapter. Further, as I will show, this perspective is of value to any would-be defender of the permissibility of procreation.



[38] Though, as I discuss in the main text, I am admittedly not sure if my arguments here are relevant to just one sort of dignity—namely, dignity vis-à-vis full moral standing.

4. A new understanding of human dignity

4.1. Overview

I bring to the fore the fact that we are creatures with a unique orientation toward (that which we) value. To us, the world is inherently value-laden. (I motivate this claim later via a thought experiment.) We are not merely able to detect and evaluate value—as a metal detector is able to detect precious objects hidden from view, or an online currency converter is able to compare different currencies; rather, we are also, uniquely, designed by nature to *care* about value. By this, I mean are often deeply *affected* by its presence or its loss. As will become evident, I do not wish to shy away from this emotional aspect to human morality.

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As an example of our relationship to value, consider the fact that, of all the intelligent species on earth, we are most affected by the loss of value that is death. We go into mourning when we lose a loved one, perform elaborate rituals to signify his or her passing, and treat the deceased's body and possessions with care as well.[39] Indeed, when we are presented with evidence that other animals can, like us, grieve at the loss of members of their species, we are surprised and deeply moved by this behaviour—as if these animals are mirroring back at us some quintessential feature of ourselves, one seeped with a *humanity* of which we are ordinarily inadequately cognisant. Elephants, for example, have been noted to have what appears to be death rituals (O'Connell 2007:75, 93). Surprising and touching characteristics such as these have

[39] I mean possessions of the deceased's that are of minimal monetary value, or of no monetary value at all, such as the precise arrangement of items in his or her room. The inheritance of large sums of money (or the promise of it) is another matter entirely…

prompted some philosophers and animal rights activists to argue that elephants are worthy of greater moral consideration (for example, Meredith 2001:147-150).

We are able not just to *value* value, and to recognise distinctions in value, but also to *evaluate* values—that is, compare and contrast them—and to discover or create hierarchical relations between them. Something that is valuable to us is something that commands us to acknowledge, utilise, or respect it—either in terms of preserving, enhancing, reproducing, promoting, venerating, or cherishing it, or simply letting it alone. Further, I suspect that, at base, what makes an act permissible is its value-producing (or preserving or enhancing) quality. Impermissible acts, on the other hand, are those which leech value. Of course, this is a very rough account, but making such a distinction between the *generative* (good) and *parasitic* (bad) qualities of permissible and impermissible acts, respectively, neatly accounts for a number of our moral intuitions. I expand on these thoughts in chapter four.

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It not sufficient to say that what gives a person a dignity is her capacity to care about value; it is, rather, her capacity to care about *a certain cluster* of values. For it is possible for her to inordinately care about things of questionable value (such as bubble-gum stains on pavements as collectables), or not recognise, let alone care about, the intrinsic goods human beings generally cognise and are affected by. To say that something has intrinsic value is to say that its value is not derived from something else—that is, intrinsic value is *nonderivative* value. Further, intrinsic value in the present context is value of a *moral* kind. I have in mind something the following list of intrinsically valuable goods offered by William Frankena:

> life, consciousness, and activity; health and strength; pleasures and satisfactions of all or certain kinds; happiness, beatitude, contentment, etc.; truth; knowledge and true opinions of various kinds, understanding, wisdom; beauty, harmony, proportion in objects contemplated; aesthetic experience; morally good dispositions or virtues; mutual affection, love, friendship, cooperation; just distribution of goods and evils; harmony and proportion in one's own life; power and experiences of achievement; self-expression; freedom; peace, security; adventure and novelty; and good reputation, honour, esteem, etc. (Frankena 1973:87-88)

What is more, the picture of humanness *qua* caring-about-value must include a uniquely human category of non-instrumental (or, perhaps more accurately, non-derivative) value. I have in mind here our tendency to ascribe a sentimental value to things. People will often hold onto (read: care deeply about) certain items. It is not uncommon for these items to be of questionable aesthetic value, or for them to have been long-since been retired from service as instruments. I suggest that the item being cherished serves as a sort of memento for a person or event representative of a particularly notable expression of one the intrinsic goods in the list above.

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Lastly, I think it important to once again emphasise that my discussion primarily focusses on care for *intrinsic* value. As I argue shortly, the inability to intuit something as intuitively valuable is, perhaps, one reason why psychopathic individuals seem unconcerned about behaving unethically when they believe that they can get away with such behaviour. These individuals will feature prominently in this chapter. Psychopathic individuals arguably do not care about—are not affected by—

the same cluster of intrinsically valuable goods ordinary people do: friendship, meaning, etc. A consequence of my understanding of dignity is that a psychopath (as I describe him) cannot be said to have a dignity, whereas many animals—and, potentially, transhumans—can.[40] This is because, according to my conception of it, dignity is located in the capacity to care about a certain cluster of values; such an "essence" can be present in a limited instantiation in certain animals, and there is in principle no reason to believe that it cannot be fully present—and recognisably "human"—in transhumans.

The allegedly useless (yet revealingly persistent) concept of dignity is revitalised when we view it not as a quality underwritten by rationality or autonomy, but rather one grounded in the quintessentially human capacity to care. Below, I borrow on works by Thomas Christiano (2008), Agnieszka Jaworska (2007), and Charles Foster (2011) to flesh out this alternative understanding dignity. Recall that according to this alternative view, *a person's dignity consists in her capacity to care about a certain cluster of values.* I show how this capacity is distinct from autonomy or the mere capacity to reason, and, thus, how this route to dignity avoids criticisms laid against the current dominant (Kantian) conception of dignity.

I should first remind the reader that my aim in defending this sort of understanding of dignity is to critically explore the view that allowing the human race to go extinct

[40] To say that a person has a dignity—that is, a superlative intrinsic value worthy of respect—is not to say that we are the *only* beings with a value of this sort. Nor is it to say that human dignity has or ought to have lexical priority over, say, canine dignity. For one may think that what grounds dignity (roughly, intrinsic worth) in one species is not what grounds the dignity of another. Or, one may be Hindu, and believe that all beings have a dignity arising from some shared essence. These metaphysical considerations turn off most moral philosophers; happily, I will not be defending to defend a version of dignity that makes metaphysical appeals of the Buddhist or theological *imago dei* sort.

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would be a violation of our duty to respect dignity. I show later how the revised understanding of dignity gives us *pro tanto* reasons to avoid human extinction. This is because if we have a dignity of the sort that I defend, voluntary extinction cannot be defended as easily as Benatar and other anti-natalists suggest it can.

4.2. On Valuing: Thomas Christiano

Moral philosophers take for granted the fact that moral philosophy is about value, and they tend to assume that the meaning of the term "value" is transparent. However, as I have discussed, in order to meaningfully understand our moral nature, we need to recognise the importance of a specific capacity to value. For it is no small matter that we have this capacity.

This fact has been recognised by Thomas Christiano (2008). Christiano argues that the Kantian view fails to adequately appreciate the importance of our capacity to value. It is this very capacity, he argues, that grounds the dignity of persons. It is worth quoting him at length:

> My hypothesis is that the humanity[41] of a person is that person's capacity to recognize, appreciate, engage with, harmonize with and produce intrinsic goods. It is in virtue of this feature of human beings, that they bring something unique and distinctive to the world and that they have a dignity worthy of respect. They are capable of seeing the value in the world. They

[41] Christiano uses "humanity" and "dignity" interchangeably.

> see the values of life, beauty, natural order and pleasure among other things. They are also capable of appreciating these values. They enjoy them; they celebrate and affirm these values. And, the appreciation, enjoyment and love of valuable things are in themselves of great value. (Christiano 2008:121)

On my view, non-psychopathic, undeluded human beings *assume* that other human beings have a dignity. What grounds our dignity is not merely our capacity to care, but the assumption that caring is morally valuable. Because of this makeup, we tend to assume even psychopaths have a dignity (an assumption I challenge), and some of us posit a dignity to animals that display certain human-like behaviours. Moral philosophers have been focussed on the question of what grounds our dignity, but I think the answer is to be found in exploring what makes us assume, in the first place, that human beings have a dignity.

Christiano's understanding of dignity is very similar to the one I have been defending. However, I place greater emphasis on the moral importance of care, of being *affected* by these values. Recall that this affective dimension is important because, for one thing, without it, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to be motivated to behave virtuously. Also, in placing greater emphasis on the capacity to care, I explicitly allow for the possibility that other, less rational creatures have a dignity. Lastly, highlighting the importance of the capacity to care better accounts for our intuitions around the psychopath case. The psychopath might be able to recognise what others value, but ultimately does not care about those things outside of their instrumental value to him. Recall, also, that he lacks our affective constraints with regard to the destruction of intrinsically valuable goods.

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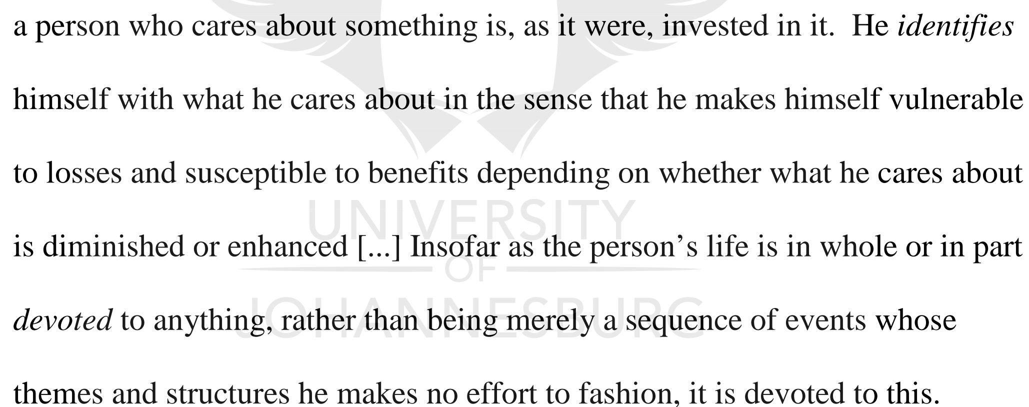
4.3. On Caring: Agnieszka Jaworska

Briefly, again, I associate human dignity not with autonomy or rationality; rather, I associate it with the uniquely human capacity to care about value—more accurately, a *cluster of values*. In fact, I am of the view that caring about these values is the essence of *what it means to be human.* (Other creatures may, and probably do, have some similar capacity to care about values, but the values in question might differ, and their carings might manifest themselves in less sophisticated ways. Nonetheless, I am of the view that such creatures can be said to have a dignity.)

Firstly, by ***care***, I mean, of course, an *affective* phenomenon. To Harry Frankfurt:



> a person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He *identifies* himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending on whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced [...] Insofar as the person's life is in whole or in part *devoted* to anything, rather than being merely a sequence of events whose themes and structures he makes no effort to fashion, it is devoted to this. (Frankfurt 1982:260; author's emphasis)

Crucially, Frankfurt notes that *what we care about* can place *constraints* upon our autonomy. Referencing the famous utterance attributed to Martin Luther, "here I stand; *I can do no other*", Frankfurt remarks:

> What he was unable to muster was not the *power* to forbear, but the *will* … Perhaps there is a sense in which Luther, even if his declaration was true,

might have been strong enough to overcome the force which obstructed his pursuit of any course of action but the one he pursued. **But he could not *bring himself* to overcome that force.**" (Frankfurt 1982:264; my emphasis)

The capacity to care plays a crucial role in Agnieszka Jaworksa's (2007) discussion of the highest kind of moral standing, one which is associated with persons; she calls it "full moral standing" (FMS) (2007:460).[42] Though she does not mention the concept of dignity in her paper, I suggest that what motivates the intuition that persons (specifically *human* persons) have FMS are the same ideas that have been underwriting my defence of dignity. Indeed, as I discuss, there are interesting parallels in our views of the moral status of psychopaths vis-à-vis their seemingly absent capacity to care.

Jaworska argues that "the emotional capacity to care is a sufficient condition of an individual's FMS as a person" (Jaworksa 2007:460). Note that in judging an *emotional* capacity to be what grounds FMS in persons, this starkly distinguishes her view from the dominant Kantian paradigm, which primarily associates the superlative moral status of persons (and note that Kantians generally limit personhood to rational human beings) with their rational capacities.[43]

The primary moral consideration afforded to a being with FMS is that it may not be interfered with (killed, injured, etc.). For example, we are in general morally prohibited from killing a being with FMS to save another being or beings with this

[42] The terms "moral standing" and "moral status" are usually synonymous.
[43] Specifically autonomy—that is, the capacity to employ reason to set ends.

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status. However, we may be morally permitted to kill, say, a chicken to save a human being (Jaworska 2007:460-1). There may also be strong moral reasons to aid beings with FMS, and to treat them fairly when distributing resources (Jaworska & Tannenbaum 2013).

Jaworska highlights the problem with the "commonsense approach" of ascribing FMS to, on the one hand, infants and individuals with significant intellectual impairments, whilst, on the other hand, denying it to non-human animals with similar or even greater intellectual capacities (Jaworska 2007:462). She calls those who adopt this commonsense approach "preservationists", and those who reject it "revisionists" (Jaworska 2007:462). Importantly, both preservationists and revisionists attempt to defend their respective positions by appealing to certain mental capacities they think underwrite FMS (462, 463-4). Of course, Jaworska argues that the capacity which in fact underwrites FMS is the capacity to care.

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Jaworska takes aim at the Kantian, who believes that what underwrites FMS in (human) persons is autonomy—that is, the capacity to use reason to set ends. She argues that for the most part, young children do not possess autonomy in the Kantian sense, yet we do not deny them FMS (Jaworska 2007:479). There is thus some capacity children possess that motivates the intuition that they are worthy of FMS—but which capacity is it, if it is not autonomy, as the Kantian thinks? To advance her case for *care* as this capacity, Jaworska shares the following passage from Sergei Aksakov's autobiography of his early childhood years:

> My little sister I loved at first more than all my toys, more than my mother; and this love took the form of a constant desire to see her, and a feeling of pity for her: I always fancied that she was cold or hungry and in want of food, and I wished constantly to give her my food and dress her in my clothes; of course I was not allowed to do this and that made me cry […] I could not bear to see her tears or hear her cry without beginning at once to cry myself […] I lay whole days in my crib with my sister beside me, amusing her with different toys or by showing her pictures.[44]

It is immediately obvious to us, Jaworska notes, that young Sergei's attitude toward his sister is one of caring (Jaworska 2007:479). Further, "[i]ntuitively, something notable, *something quintessentially human*, is manifest here" (Jaworska 2007:480; my emphasis). As I alluded to above, when we notice certain behaviours suggestive of caring in animals, it strikes us as hauntingly *human*. Similarly, very young human children displaying caring behaviours—even though they are expected to eventually develop the capacity to care—move us with their surprising depth of feeling at such a young age. There is in fact evidence that even two-to-three year olds are capable of caring, and caring about objects and ideas as well (Jaworska 2007:480). What is more, in these displays of caring,

> [t]here is something compellingly human […] a special form of motivation expressed in action. These children do not engage in the complex reasoning required for Kantian autonomy, and they surely lack the necessary capabilities.

[44] Aksakov (2007:1). Sergei's "sister" is in fact the daughter of his family's servant (Jaworska 2007:480).

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> And yet we would be very tempted to attribute FMS to them, even in the intra-agential sense. (Jaworska 2007:480)

The Kantian view of FMS thus seems either incomplete or in error: though no one would want to deny that our capacity to use reason to direct our actions toward specific ends is still morally important, this capacity seems insufficient to undergird our special moral status as human beings. Indeed, Jaworska (2007:482) is clear that a "radical rethinking of the Kantian view" is needed in order to incorporate the superlative moral significance of caring. But first, how ought we to define "caring"? Jaworska (2007:483) believes that caring

> has an even more complex structure than most ordinary emotions—it is best understood as a structured compound of various less complex emotions, emotional predispositions, and also desires, unfolding over time in response to relevant circumstances.

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Crucially, caring includes appropriate emotional reactions, such as

> joy and satisfaction when the object of one's care is doing well and advancing and frustration over its misfortunes or setbacks, anger at agents who heedlessly cause such misfortunes or setbacks, pride in the successes for the object and disappointment over its defeats or failures, the desire to help ensure those successes and to help avoid the setbacks, fear when the object is in jeopardy and relief when it escapes untouched, and grief at the loss of the object and the subsequent nostalgia. (Jaworska 2007:483-4)

As I discuss below, a full blown psychopath appears to lack the capacity to care. Jaworska (2007:486-487) discusses a case of so-called "acquired psychopathy" involving a man named Elliott. Elliot suffered brain damage to his ventromedial prefrontal cortices—an area (along with the amygdala) that is significantly under-functioning in psychopaths. Subsequent to the injury, Elliot scored normal results on psychological tests of intelligence, basic reasoning, and so forth—yet his capacity to care was severely impaired:

> Elliot showed no abnormalities in means-ends reasoning and problem solving; he was perfectly able to come up with a full array of options for action in a particular situation as well as to work out the consequences of each option. Yet his ability to choose was impaired. After a full analysis of all the options he would comment, "I still wouldn't know what to do!" *His emotional responses and feelings were severely blunted, and this "prevented him from assigning different values to different options, and made his decision-making landscape hopelessly flat." He was no longer sufficiently invested in anything; he simply ceased to care.* (Jaworska 2007:486-7; my emphasis)[45]

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It is important to note here that Jaworska's account of caring, which I endorse, does not allow for the possibility that caring can be an ephemeral mental disposition (2007:487). And so, though he still had preferences and had a fleeting interest in things, what Elliot lacked was "sustained and caring interest in anything, a pattern of emotional investment retained over time" (Jaworska 2007:487). In the fashion typical

[45] Elliot's story appears in: Damasio, A. R. 1994. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Avon Books, 34-51. Damasio summarises his patient's "predicament" as "*to know but not to feel*" (Damasio 1994:45; author's emphasis).

of a psychopath, Elliot was unable to sustain relationships or hold down a job, tending instead to be moved by impulsive drives and desires (Jaworska 2007:487).

Does contemporaneous Elliot have FMS? Consider the fact that prior to Elliot sustaining brain damage (from a brain tumour that was eventually removed), Elliot had been a model husband and father, and was maintaining a successful career (Damasio 1994:35). Certainly, on Kantian grounds at least, the Elliot of the past had FMS, and it would have been *pro tanto* impermissible for us to obstruct him in his pursuit of his ends. But what are our moral obligations toward Elliot now as it relates to respecting his current interests?

Ordinarily, running a person's affairs, against their express interests, incurs a significant "moral cost" (Jaworska 2007:465)—even in cases where we are permitted to do so, such as when we are acting behalf of young children, intellectually impaired individuals, and, less straightforwardly, teenagers. Jaworska (2007:464-465) argues that when we act paternalistically on behalf of children and teenagers, there is a moral cost here—namely one resulting from acting against their contemporaneous interests. However, this moral cost is outweighed by the good of supporting their future interests. And in the case of persons who become intellectually impaired through injury or disease, denying them gratification of their immediate desires might be justified by appealing to their past values and interests. In Elliot's case, Jaworska (2007:488-489) argues that we are now morally permitted—and perhaps obliged—to act on contemporary Elliot's behalf. In other words, Elliot lacks FMS:

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> Since nothing seems to matter deeply to Elliot now and his choices simply express whims of the moment, we can reasonably surmise that Elliot doesn't have contemporaneous interests that would command full moral respect. It does appear morally appropriate to override Elliot's current motivations in the name of the value-based interests of his former self. (Jaworska 2007:488-489)

If correct, this is a conclusion that considerably weakens the Kantian account of what gives a person FMS, since Elliot can still be said to possess the ability to reason (Jaworska 2007:490). What is missing in him, however, and what Jaworska (and I) think grounds FMS, is the capacity to care.

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Note that I have consistently avoided referring to psychopaths as "persons." This is because I do not believe that they are persons, in the full phenomenological—and (therefore?) *moral*—sense. To be clear, I have been endorsing a phenomenological—more precisely, an *affective*—view of personhood. On this view, what makes a creature a "person" is some recognisable capacity to care (think here again of the reactions of elephants upon finding a fallen member of their group). Further, what makes us *human* persons is the particular cluster of values we care most deeply about. Ideally, our lives ought to be characterised by the pursuit of projects that respect, promote, and cherish these values. We ought to—and we ought to *want* to—structure our lives around intrinsically valuable goods, such as love and friendship.[46]

[46] To be sure, the ability to use reason to direct ourselves toward certain ends imbues us with some moral worth. But other animals can be said to possess similar capacities in some meaningful sense, which is a problem for the Kantian view of dignity, but not my own.

Elliot, along with "genuine" full-blown psychopaths, might be able to rationally pursue certain ends according to their fleeting whims and desires, but they lack the capacity to truly care about these ends. Further, and more importantly, the ends they choose to pursue reveal the poverty of their value-caring: these individuals are unmotivated to pursue, over a sustained period of time, such intrinsically valuable goods as friendship and familial love.[47]

Unlike creatures who are moved by momentary desires or instinctual drives, we (non-psychopaths) are unique in that we are motivated, and largely defined, by our carings. It is through the capacity to care that we are able to elevate and distinguish ourselves from mere beasts. To know a given person is to know what she cares about. To truly know her intimately is to know what she cares about most deeply. Crucially, we can reliably predict how a given person will react to a certain situation if we have a clear picture of her carings. The psychopath's behaviour, on the other hand, is not predicated on his carings, but on certain parasitic drives, such as the drive to manipulate people and have power over them. I return to this discussion of psychopathy in a later section, as I believe it helps us see why dignity is an indispensable concept to ethics.

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4.4. On Flourishing: Charles Foster

[47] It would be right to point out that some psychopaths do in fact successfully pose as family-oriented individuals (Bernie Madoff comes to mind here). Further, many psychopaths are able to sustain long-term projects (Madoff again). But Jaworska reminds us that we should not confuse caring with "monomaniacal attention to a goal" (2007:487).

I am of the view that one can be said to be "flourishing" if one's life is rich in the sorts of intrinsically valuable goods Frankena highlights (1973:87-88).[48] Indeed, though he does not explicitly make this link to Frankena's list, as I have, Charles Foster defines dignity as "objective human flourishing" (2011:6). Like all living creatures, we aim toward thriving. For us, we flourish by being participants in "the human adventure", an "enterprise" in which we are all in some way engaged (Foster 2011:5).

Foster believes that dignity is "the key that, properly wielded, unlocks all problems in medical ethics and bioethics" (2011:1), and he believes that the concept better explains our duties toward moral patients than the principle of autonomy. To illustrate this last point, Foster asks us to consider an uncomfortable case:

> A teenage girl with profound learning disabilities is admitted to hospital. She is undressed ready for a surgical procedure, but is left naked on a hospital trolley for several hours in full view of some male youths. They do nothing but look at her and lust. She enjoys the attention. (Foster 2011:2)

There is some moral wrongness here, but it is hard to express without appealing to the concept of dignity. Beauchamp and Childress's four principles (1979) do not seem to tell us what is wrong. The girl wants to be seen by the boys, so autonomy has not

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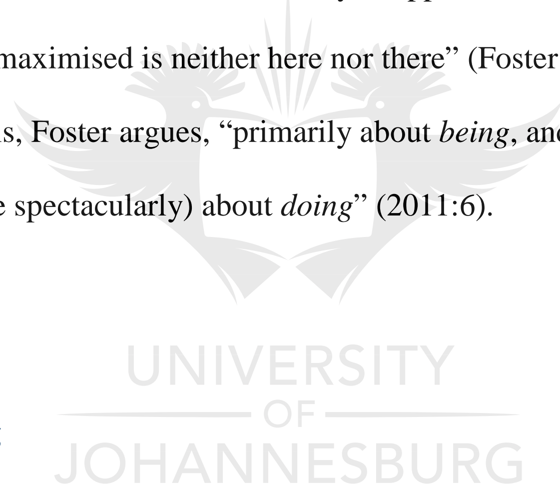
[48] As a reminder, they are: "[...] life, consciousness, and activity; health and strength; pleasures and satisfactions of all or certain kinds; happiness, beatitude, contentment, etc.; truth; knowledge and true opinions of various kinds, understanding, wisdom; beauty, harmony, proportion in objects contemplated; aesthetic experience; morally good dispositions or virtues; mutual affection, love, friendship, cooperation; just distribution of goods and evils; harmony and proportion in one's own life; power and experiences of achievement; self-expression; freedom; peace, security; adventure and novelty; and good reputation, honour, esteem, etc." (Frankena 1973:87-88).

been violated, insofar as she can be considered to be autonomous; non-maleficence does not illuminate matters either, for it is difficult to explain (without appealing to the concept of dignity) what harm has been done; and it is not clear that beneficence or justice are applicable in this case. (Foster 2011:2)

We recognise that in the case above, the girl is not in a scenario that assists her flourishing. As a participant in the human project, though she might want to be viewed lustfully by certain persons under certain conditions, she ought not to be placed in the scenario outlined above—let alone find herself enjoying it. The fact that does not have "the neuronal hardware necessary to appreciate that [her] own flourishing is being maximised is neither here nor there" (Foster 2008:6). This is because flourishing is, Foster argues, "primarily about *being*, and only secondarily (although often more spectacularly) about *doing*" (2011:6).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4.5. Dignity as caring

The above relates to anti-natalism in the following manner. The capacity to care about a certain cluster of values means that certain ends are morally abominable to us. Directing ourselves toward the extinction of our own species is arguably one such end, and perhaps the most morally disturbing of them all. For while this end might be pursued out of morally commendable welfarist concerns regarding the problem of human suffering, it is only due to the fact that we are the sorts of creatures that we are—creatures who care deeply about a certain cluster of values—that this desire to end human suffering has any normative appeal to us at all. But voluntary human extinction has no real moral purchase in light of higher, value-preserving goals, such

as the desire to engage in projects that ensure one's friends and family will continue to flourish long after one's passing.

My suggestion, echoing Christiano, is that we are a unique species, in the sense that we can *value* value. Further, at our finest, we aim not just to protect value, but to cultivate it. This is very evident, for example, in our strong desire to prevent the extinction of our and other species. My proposal is that we are what I shall call "the caretaker species," and that we flourish morally (and the planet, in general, flourishes) when we aim to cultivate this aspect of our nature. At our finest, we add more value to the world than we take from it.[49]

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[49] It is difficult to unpack this intuition, and I do not defend it directly in this thesis. Briefly, though, I think this intuition is related to world-regarding duties—a concept I unpack later in the main text.

5. Bolstering the new understanding of human dignity

5.1. Overview

In this chapter, I forward my own arguments against two of the most-discussed critics of dignity, namely Ruth Macklin and Steven Pinker. My aim, ultimately, is to further demonstrate that dignity—specifically the version of dignity that I have introduced—is an essential concept to bioethics. I read Macklin and Pinker as laying two distinct charges against dignity. First, I read them as arguing that it is an inherently ambiguous, and thus essentially meaningless, concept. Second, they argue that dignity is a superfluous concept, as other concepts—specifically respect for persons or their autonomy—are sufficient to do the justificatory work in ethical arguments. (Likewise, someone like Peter Singer would say that moral debates can be settled by appealing to interests rather than to some alleged property like "dignity".) They thus conclude that appealing to dignity adds nothing to ethical debates, and, worse still, obfuscates matters.

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It could be argued that respondents to Macklin and Pinker (recall that I discussed four: Doris Schroeder, Suzy Killmister, Christopher Kaczor, and Daniel P. Sulmasy) adopt a strategy that really only addresses the first charge against dignity—namely that it is an inherently meaningless concept. Here, they do the work of untangling the different intended meanings of dignity, and make a case for accepting the term as inherently pluralistic. However, so the argument goes, though their discussions might be illuminating, this task of fleshing out the different meanings of dignity—which I read as the task of providing different *conceptions* of dignity—will not necessarily help

assuage Macklin's and Pinker's doubts as to the usefulness of dignity as a normative *concept*. The objection, that is to say, is that Macklin's and Pinker's second, stronger, claim about the superfluity of the concept needs to be addressed directly.

I am not sure that this objection is fair, as Schroeder et al. do not completely neglect the issue of dignity's alleged superfluity—most clearly evinced by their appeals to value (which, to my mind, are persuasive). Having said that, I aim in this chapter to assuage any lingering doubts as to the usefulness of the concept of dignity, though I am admittedly not sure if my arguments here are relevant to just one sort of dignity—namely, dignity vis-à-vis FMS. In any event, I hope the reader will be convinced that dignity is far from superfluous.

The important distinction between *concepts* and *conceptions* is most famously associated with John Rawls's discussion of justice. Noting that people disagree about what is just or unjust, and that it thus seems as though there are different *conceptions* of justice, Rawls (1999:5) says that

> [in existing societies, people] disagree about which principles should define the basic terms of their association. Yet we may still say, despite this disagreement, that they each have a conception of justice... Thus it seems natural to think of the concept of justice as distinct from the various conceptions of justice and as being specified by the role which these different sets of principles, these different conceptions, have in common.

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Macklin and Pinker ultimately deny the usefulness of the very *concept* of dignity, and argue that other ethical concepts do the work that dignity is alleged to do. I address this charge of superfluity before returning briefly to the less serious charge of ambiguity. Unlike Macklin, Pinker, and others—Peter Singer, for example—I am not convinced that the concept of dignity can be abandoned with no loss to ethics. I take the relevant sense of "dignity" that I am most concerned with here to be synonymous with "a superlative, intrinsic value worthy of respect"; this is an essential component of dignity, as I intend to defend it in this thesis.

To my mind, retaining the concept of dignity might be able to do one crucial thing: constrain our behaviour. The concept of dignity, in other words, reminds us that not everything is permitted: We may not, even in the pursuit of *prima facie* morally good aims, such as that of ending human suffering, allow the *loss* of certain kinds of intrinsically valuable things.[50] It could be argued that a value does not serve to remind us this (namely, that not everything is permitted); only a norm or reason can do this, and saying we must respect autonomy ought to suffice. But it is worth knowing why an obligation obtains, and a value might well explain this. And so, in addition to the arguments I present, I will say this here: This is a thesis on anti-natalism—an ethical position that proceeds from uncontroversial premises, and uses the tools of contemporary ethics not only to defend, but to make plausible, the conclusion that it would be better, all things considered, if the human race went

[50] It could be argued that a value does not serve to remind us this (namely, that not everything is permitted); only a norm or reason can do this, and saying we must respect autonomy ought to suffice. In addition to the arguments I present in the main text, all I will say here is this: This is a thesis on anti-natalism—an ethical position that proceeds from uncontroversial premises, and uses the tools of contemporary ethics not only to defend, but to make plausible, the conclusion that it would be better, all things considered, if the human race went extinct. If ever there was occasion to review the values that underpin the norms and reasons appealed to by ethicists (those in the Western philosophical tradition, at least), it ought to be in response to the emergence of such a position.

extinct. If ever there was occasion to review the values that underpin the norms and reasons appealed to by ethicists (those in the Western philosophical tradition, at least), it ought to be in response to the emergence of such a position.

Most relevant to the present chapter, voluntary human extinction is arguably not permitted as a "solution" to the moral problem of human suffering, because the annihilation of beings with a superlative, intrinsic value is not permitted. I do not attempt to apply my revised understanding of dignity to the abortion or euthanasia debates, for example, but my goal with the arguments I advance below is to defend the view that the concept dignity, properly understood, is of great value to the natal debate.

With this in mind, I give two interrelated lines of argument for why I am doubtful as to the possibility of doing ethics without the concept of dignity. First, I argue that moral conclusions in any ethics without some notion of dignity (specifically the version I argue for) would be *underdetermined*, in the sense that would be difficult to motivate them, as it would be impossible to weigh up moral values. In other words, a complete justification of a moral prescription needs to appeal to dignity.

Second, I demonstrate why it is not possible for us to engage in moral reasoning without having some capacity to first recognise and then weigh up values, and how the capacity to *care* about the values we recognise and evaluate is what is essentially being appealed to when one declares that human beings have a dignity.[51] To be clear,

[51] This might strike the reader as a very Kantian account of dignity—and, to a great extent, it is. However, my view of dignity and Kant's move apart through my discussion of the *affective* dimension of our nature as beings of value, and my privileging of the capacity to care over the capacity to act autonomously. I discuss this further in the main text.

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I argue that the capacity to care about value creates *the conditions for the possibility of being moral, at least in some major respects*. This is a bold claim, and I only have space to offer a limited defence of it. I do so in part by demonstrating how an individual who completely lacks the capacity to recognise, let alone care about, the values most salient to human beings would *really* behave. Such an individual, I argue, would lack our "dignity lens", and would subsequently be incapable of desiring to behave ethically.

5.2. An ethics without dignity is underdetermined

Henry Sidgwick famously noted that it can be difficult to account for why a person ought to act ethically if it is in his or her interest to do otherwise.[52] Sidgwick was a utilitarian, but this "dualism of practical reason" problem is not unique to that particular moral theory. In arguing for a dignity-less moral outlook, Macklin and Pinker prompt a similar question to the one Sidgwick first posed in 1874, namely: "Why ought I to care about respecting other people and their autonomy?" Or, perhaps less bleakly: "Why ought I to care about a person over and above respecting her autonomy?"

I suggest that Macklin and Pinker have underestimated the value of the concept of dignity to ethics. Indeed, I am of the view that dignity underwrites many of our moral intuitions: it is what motivates us to behave ethically in the first place, which is why I think that an ethics without it is underdetermined. I defend this claim in two ways.

[52] See: Sidgwick, H. 1962 [1874].

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First, I argue that Macklin and Pinker underappreciate the Kantian—and thus inherently dignity-based—origins of the concept of respect for persons. Second, I provide examples of where it is not clear how to behave without the concept of dignity. Here, I argue that the practice of gift-giving demonstrates that people see themselves and others as sites of intrinsic value—that is, as beings with a dignity.

5.2.1. General motivational problems

Recall that Macklin and Pinker argue that the concept of dignity can be replaced with the concept of respect for persons or their autonomy. On the face of it, this is not an unreasonable claim: the concept of respect for persons is well established in the Western liberal tradition. As Sidgwick noted, however, problems arise when attempting to motivate a moral prescription without underwriting it with something like divine command theory. Kant's views on dignity, though, are intended to offer a way out: as I read him, Kant's attempt at a secular motivation for morality relies on the assumption that the presence of "an absolute inner worth" (*Ak*. 6:435)—that is, a dignity—acts as a constraint upon our behaviour. Consider the following passage:

> But man regarded as a person, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price; for as a person (*homo noumenon)* he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in himself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. (*Ak.* 6:434-435; author's emphasis)

As I read him here, Kant believes that people "exact" our respect not merely because they have the ability to reason (and are thereby autonomous). Rather, it is because of this capacity that we (unavoidably) ascribe a superlative, intrinsic value (that is, a dignity) to persons, including ourselves. To be clear, it is *this* intrinsic value, and not reason or autonomy *simpliciter*, that is worthy of respect, and which indeed *demands* respect. The concept of dignity is, in other words, underwrites the concept of respect for persons.

Macklin and Pinker might respond that since, on the Kantian account, autonomy is what constitutes dignity, we do not need the latter concept (that is, dignity). But it is important to draw a distinction between the evaluative and the normative, with the former grounding the latter. Further, recall that I have been arguing that autonomy does *not* in fact constitute dignity; the capacity to care (about a certain cluster of values) does.

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Another point worth considering is that unlike many contemporary friends of the disembodied version of respect for persons, Kant places far stricter constraints on autonomy. This is perhaps most evident in his famous rejection of suicide, as it is to him a "debasing of humanity in one's person" (*Ak.* 6:422–423). In fact, the disembodied version of "respect for persons" is so far divorced from its Kantian origins that it is less "respect for persons or their autonomy" and more "respect for the ideals of Western liberalism or libertarianism".[53]

[53] Having said that, I should note that many Kantian liberals would agree that suicide violates a duty to oneself, but might also deny that suicide should be against the law.

To summarise, it is hard to motivate for the concept of respect for persons without positing the notion that a person has a superlative, intrinsic value worthy of respect. In other words, the "respect" in "respect for persons" is a kind of shorthand for "categorical respect for the inherent value—that is, dignity—of persons". Macklin and Pinker fail to realise that the concept of dignity is a central pillar to the concept of respect for persons, and that it loses much of its normative force without dignity. To be clear, I am arguing that when we respect, we are usually ascribing value in some way. Further, this sort of respect is essential to our moral lives.[54] I motivate these last two points with a thought experiment involving gift-giving.

5.2.2. Gift-giving

As a second way of understanding why an ethics without the concept of dignity is underdetermined, consider the following discussion, which brings out the shortcomings of a moral outlook based solely on interests, or even mere respect for persons or their autonomy. Below, I discuss the quintessentially human activity of gift-giving. This activity, I argue, offers clues as to our relationship to value, and thus to dignity. Gift-giving, I conclude, demonstrates that we are fundamentally creatures of value, creatures for whom affirmations of value are essential to our flourishing.

I think most readers will agree that when I surprise my girlfriend with a gift of, say, a single rose, there is some goodness to my act of gift-giving. (Assume here that I am

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[54] I should acknowledge that it seems conceptually *possible* to treat respectfully without valuing a person's dignity. However, my contention is that the morally most compelling form of respect is an expression of valuation.

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not presenting her with a rose in an attempt to apologise to her.) But how best to explain what makes the act of gift-giving good, in general? Mightn't it be the fact that by giving a person a thoughtful and appropriate gift, I thereby affirm her value?[55] I submit that it is, and argue for this conclusion below.

The act of gift-giving is, I think, very revealing. We *act* as though we have a value—one that, furthermore, ought to be affirmed. We can feel *undeserving* of a gift, or, on the other hand, *insulted* or *hurt* if we feel that the gift does not adequately speak affirmatively of our value. It is difficult to state precisely what this value consists of; nevertheless, we all have been enriched by its presence, or felt underappreciated by its absence. A gift needn't be of great monetary value. It needn't be of monetary value at all. Nor need it be of instrumental value: no one's sweetheart can eat a rose, and it will last on display for all but a few days before wilting. Indeed, a gift needn't even be a physical object. A gift can be a smile to a stranger, a revealing, heartfelt anecdote to a grieving widow about the kindness of her recently deceased husband, or a teacher taking a student aside for a few moments to give him what may prove to be life-changing advice.

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Macklin or Pinker might explain the goodness of gift-giving by appealing to respect for persons or their autonomy. But how might they do this? For one thing, as I argued above, it is not clear what they mean by "respect for persons". Setting aside my previous criticisms of their endorsement of the concept "respect for persons", let us assume that they have some reasonable concept of respect in mind. What might

[55] And not necessarily merely her value *to me*.

this concept look like? Conceivably, it might involve improving another's welfare, or respecting or augmenting her autonomy.

And what about a utilitarian, who might argue that gift-giving is good, not because of "dignity", but because it makes people happy? In response to these questions about how a utilitarian or Macklin and Pinker might view the moral issues surrounding gift-giving, consider the following example of a gift that does not straightforwardly involve happiness, and which in fact may involve some degree of *un*happiness.

> Posthumous Videotape
>
> *Hard-drinking Carl is dying from cancer. He is told by his doctors that he has no more than six months to get his affairs in order. Sure enough, six months later, he is dead. A couple of weeks pass, and his grieving widow, Patricia, receives a post-dated parcel in the mail. Inside is a videotape (we are in the year 1990), and on it is a message Carl recorded for her shortly before his passing. In the message, Carl says that none of the hurtful things he told her about herself were even remotely true. Bursting into tears (this is the first time Patricia has seen him cry), he reveals that he had never felt worthy of her love, and that he drank even harder because of the regret he felt at breaking down her self-esteem to make her stay with him. This video message increases her grief. She realises that the many years she spent trying to fix her stormy relationship with Carl were not entirely wasted, but this realisation is more bitter than sweet. Further, though the message finally removes the doubts she had as to Carl's love for her, the fact that this revelation has come so late adds to her heartache.*

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There is one little light, though. Now, at age 85, and with mere weeks to live herself (tragically, she has recently been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour), Patricia realises for the first time that she is indeed worthy of love. She cannot categorise the feelings this realisation gives her as "pleasurable"; indeed, it might be somewhere on the pain spectrum, given its close association with bitterness and a deep sense of loss. Nevertheless, though her everyday patterns of behaviour do not change, though she does not ever become a "happy person", her perspective on her self-worth has shifted ever so slightly due to Carl's message. She would still be categorised as having very low self-esteem; nevertheless, she recognises that Carl was intending to give her a gift, and the mere fact that someone *cared enough to give her a gift—someone who truly* knew *her—provides Patricia with a new outlook on herself.*

In the above case, one person, Carl, has attempted to affirm the intrinsic worth of another, Patricia. In acting in this fashion, he is not straightforwardly acting to advance her interests. Indeed, for all he knows, it might be in Patricia's interests to completely forget about his existence as soon as he is in the ground. What is more, he is not necessarily appealing to utilitarian considerations of promoting happiness. To be sure, the affirmation of Patricia's value *may* lead to knock-on effects that eventually increase her happiness or well-being. But the videotape does not, in fact, increase Patricia's happiness. However, this does not take away from the fact that there is some goodness to her receiving it, and to Carl's act of giving it. I submit that this goodness arises from the value-affirming nature of (selfless and appropriately considered) gift-giving. And the act of gift-giving *works*, because we are beings who,

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at our core, consider ourselves to have a superlative, intrinsic value worthy of respect. If there is pleasure upon receiving a gift, it is *because* of the value ascriptions involved.

It might be argued that the rightness here can be explained using the concept of autonomy. Perhaps Carl can be said to have advanced one of Patricia's ends. But, as I suggest again shortly, many people—especially chronically depressed people—often feel unworthy of pursing ends. Insofar as Carl's final actions can be said to have respected Patricia's autonomy, and thereby helped Patricia find new found respect for her autonomy, his actions did so by affirmed to her that she was *worthy* of pursuing her desired ends. And in order to do this, his actions had to be directed toward affirming her intrinsic value as a human being.

Abandoning the concept of dignity thus means neglecting the normative importance of a whole realm of human experience—namely, the experience of oneself as a being with a superlative worth or value. This core of a person is no less vital to her cognition of herself than the awareness that she is a being with interests, or a being with autonomy. Concepts like respect for persons assume that people are already aware of their worth *qua* human beings—that is, as beings with a superlative, intrinsic value worthy of respect.

It is worth reflecting further upon the fact that our relationship to value extends in this manner to our apprehension of ourselves. Consider such phrases as "self-worth". It is vital to even a basic level of happiness—let alone our flourishing—that we see ourselves as possessing some often-indefinable worth or value to our friends, family,

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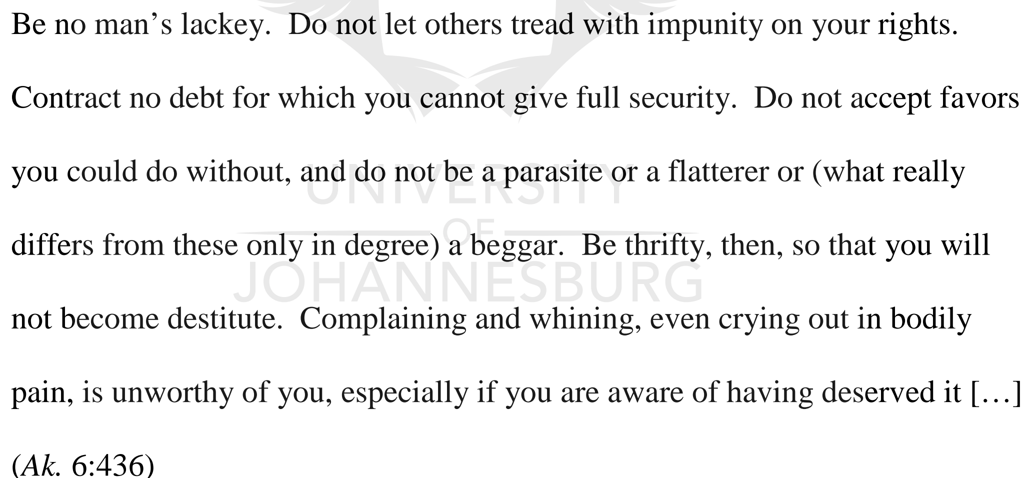
community, and perhaps (for some people) the world. Someone with little sense of self-worth will often feel unworthy of even basic goods like happiness. Such individuals typically have had their sense of self-worth damaged via abuse or neglect. Crucially, many of them have not had their value sufficiently affirmed by their primary caregivers during their formative years. It can be difficult for such damaged individuals to will themselves into believing that they have an intrinsic value that others ought to respect—even though they might recognise that it is in their own interests to (somehow) cultivate this sense of self-worth. And so, they might hobble through life constantly apologising for their own existence, feeling loathsome for taking up space, and struggling to say “no”, or to stand up for themselves. They might struggle, in other words, to live according to Kant’s advice:



> Be no man’s lackey. Do not let others tread with impunity on your rights. Contract no debt for which you cannot give full security. Do not accept favors you could do without, and do not be a parasite or a flatterer or (what really differs from these only in degree) a beggar. Be thrifty, then, so that you will not become destitute. Complaining and whining, even crying out in bodily pain, is unworthy of you, especially if you are aware of having deserved it […] (*Ak.* 6:436)

To drive the point home, think here of chronic depression—which is oftentimes accompanied, or is perhaps precipitated by, low self-esteem or a crippling sense of worthlessness.[56] Depressed persons often lose interest in following their interests! Indeed, they commonly develop an “interest” in ending their own existence. If our

[56] Perhaps it is even partially *constituted* by these things.

aim is to help such persons out of their suicidal states, it is hard to see how we could be assisted by the use of a deontological principle like respect for persons (which ostensibly calls for us to respect a person's autonomy), or via a utilitarian position such as Singer's (which calls for us to respects a person's interests—primarily the interest to avoid pain). In fact, adherents of the preceding two moral perspectives might be hard-pressed to recommend against suicide without appealing to the interests or happiness of the people who will be affected by the death of the person who kills himself.

A fuller understanding of dignity and its importance to human beings, on the other hand, would help us justify paternalistic interventions that, for example, aim bolster a depressed individual's sense of self-worth. The utilitarian fails to realise that there is something prior to, and more fundamental than, happiness or the pursuit of interests *simpliciter*. And Macklin and Pinker similarly fail to recognise precisely what it is that underwrites the principle of respect for persons. In both cases, the missing link is dignity.

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Perhaps the reader is not convinced, and still believes that the goodness of gift-giving can be cashed out in terms of interests alone, that appealing to dignity is unnecessary. After all, perhaps it is possible to take a utilitarian stance, and argue that gift-giving is good, not because of "dignity", but because it makes people happy. But consider the following. I am unlikely to respect (all) the interests of a being to whom I deny intrinsic value. This is most clear in cases where the beings under consideration are marked as *vermin*. Sadly, many, if not all, genocides, witch hunts, and (other) cases

of scapegoating, are marked by this tendency to label the offensive group ("them") as being parasitic upon (what "we") value.

When the propagandist seeks to blame society's problems on a scapegoat, he does not necessarily deny that the scapegoat possesses reason or autonomy. Nor does he need to argue, in order for his plan of exterminating the scapegoat to succeed, that the scapegoat lacks an interest in avoiding pain, or in continuing to exist. Rather, his claim is that the scapegoat uses his reason and autonomy in nefarious ways. More specifically, the propagandist claims that the scapegoat uses his agency is used in a *parasitic* manner: The scapegoat does not respect value as *we* do. *This* is why, if the propagandist's brainwashing is successful, the scapegoat comes to lack a superlative, intrinsic value worthy of respect (dignity) in the eyes of broader society. The scapegoat, so the story goes, values only insofar as it aids his own selfish and parasitic ends.

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I have argued that some understanding of the concept of dignity may underwrite ethics. I should note that my version of what gives us a dignity differs from Kant's, in that I think that what confers dignity upon a being is not simply reason or autonomy, but rather the capacity to care about a certain cluster of values. Our accounts have more similarities than differences, though, in that, most crucially, we both consider dignity—whatever it is that grounds it—to be a superlative, intrinsic value that demands respect.

If my arguments here are correct, I am of the view that in order for Singer, for example, to argue for the equal consideration of interests of animals—human and

non-human alike—he must implicitly rely on some notion of dignity; I am of the view that Macklin and Pinker make implicit appeals to dignity as well—in particular, Pinker, when he appeals to dehumanisation. Leaving Macklin and Pinker aside, in the next chapter I look at individuals for whom dignity *truly* has no normative weight, individuals for whom the notion of intrinsic value does not serve to constrain behaviour.

5.3. Something like dignity creates the conditions for the possibility of being moral (at least in some major respects)

Anti-natalism is the view that it would be, all things considered, better if the human race went extinct. Though many anti-natalists seem not to think that this is a *reductio* of their argument, I have been suggesting that there is in fact a serious moral wrongness to such a pro-extinction view—one which reveals the deficiency of the thoroughgoing welfarism of the anti-natalist position. In order to see why this is the case, it is necessary to look at non-welfarist values—in particular, dignity. The version of dignity that I have in mind clarifies why a thoroughgoing anti-natalism might be indefensible, all things considered.

Ultimately, to ask what it is that gives us a dignity is to ask what it is that makes us human.[57] I have been associating dignity with the capacity to care about a certain

[57] This was the consensus at the *Future of Human Dignity* conference I presented at in Utrecht, Netherlands, on 11-13 October 2016. I should also emphasise that though I am talking here of *human* dignity, I am partial to the idea that many non-human animals can also be said to have a dignity. What gives *them* a dignity would differ from what gives *us* a dignity, though perhaps this would differ only in terms of 1) the degree or quality of care the non-human species in question could experience for 2)

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cluster of values. I am of the view that without this capacity, individuals are incapable of truly motivating themselves to be morally good. To show why this is so, in this section I examine what it would be like if we *truly* lacked the capacity to distinguish between different categories of values, or to weigh up individual goods within those categories. I try to imagine how individuals with impaired versions of this capacity would see the world. I argue that by performing a kind of phenomenological analysis of the ways in which we (and others quite dissimilar to us) ordinarily tend to perceive the world, we will come to see that we most probably have a sort of "dignity lens"—a kind of category of perception that gives us an inescapably value-laden view of the world.

It is important to note that according my conception of it, our dignity lens is not merely a way of visually apprehending the world, but rather more a way of being *affected* by the world. Taking this thought further, our dignity lens enables a certain a *mode of being* in the world—specifically a moral mode of being. Individuals with this lens tend to find themselves moved to act in certain morally good ways, and also to avoid certain morally bad acts (such as unjustifiably harming a fellow human being). On the other hand, those without it might only be motivated to "do the right thing" not because they experience some sort of intuitive pull toward this manner of acting, but because they are trying always to eke out as much instrumental gain as possible from every situation. In other words, they have worked out that it is in their interests to appear morally good.

the cluster of values dearest to them. But these are difficult questions, and I do not claim to be able to offer satisfactory answers to them.

Our dignity lens thus also serves as an in-built mechanism of *constraint*, deterring us from certain morally problematic acts, beliefs, and dispositions. To be clear, our dignity lens serves two functions: first, it detects value in the world, and second, it constrains our behaviour by making us care about value. As I read him, Robert Nozick makes similar claims regarding the "moral pull and moral push" of moral forces (1981:401). By this he means, in part, that because of the "value or preciousness of persons",

> [y]our value creates a moral claim or constraint on my behaviour toward you; because of your value, others (including me) ought to behave toward you in some ways, not others. (Nozick 1981:401)

Our dignity lens is hidden in plain sight. In order to bring it to the foreground, I draw attention to individuals who seem not to have a dignity lens, namely psychopaths. To this end, I provide a philosophical understanding of psychopathy. Psychopaths seem incapable of the sort of moral reasoning we (neurotypical human beings) ordinarily perform. I regard the psychopath as an individual who can only view things as instrumentally valuable—specifically, instrumentally valuable to *him*. His moral circle, if we could call that, consists of only one individual: himself.[58] He might know that others do not view the world in this manner; he might also know that most people think that everyone ought to care about certain specific goods, and, further, to care about them in terms of their intrinsic value; he, however, believes his own

[58] As an aside, it is hard to find reliable data on this, but by scouring psychopath forums on the dark recesses of the web, it would seem that many psychopaths cannot make sense of the concept of dignity—let alone assign even themselves a dignity.

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satisfaction is good for its own sake. Crucially, the psychopath apparently does not care that his value system—if we could call it that—is constructed in this extraordinary fashion.

Further—or rather, as I argue, *as a consequence* of his value-impaired perceptive system—the psychopath does not think that there is any inherent wrongness to his lack of care about the cluster of values ordinary people care about. Or he might accept that it is wrong but not care about that! In other words, the psychopath's lack of ethical concern is ultimately a logical consequence of his inability to care about the same cluster of values we care about. Most crucially, the psychopath truly does not see any intrinsic value (dignity) to human life: the presence of human life (or even human-like characteristics) does not serve as an in-built moral constraint to his behaviour. I contrast the psychopath's behaviour with that of an ordinary person, and to that of a possible being I call a "psychopath+". This last individual cannot recognize *any* distinctions in value—he truly has what one might call "value blindness".

Though I admittedly I draw these distinctions with some degree of artificiality, I nevertheless think that they serve as useful intuition pumps to help us better understand the usefulness of the concept of dignity. Further, I recognise that there is by no means consensus amongst mental health professionals as to how to diagnose psychopathy, nor is there uniformity with regards to what to label the spectrum of behaviours often grouped under the term "psychopathy". Nevertheless, I see my contribution here as offering a *philosophical* understanding of psychopathy.

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Thus, whatever the genetic or environmental causes of the condition popularly known as “psychopathy” might be, and however the brains of psychopaths might differ physically from those of ordinary people, my claim is that these conditions effectively make the psychopath an individual who does not care about the particular cluster of values we ordinarily do, and that it is *this* deficiency in his makeup that renders him unable to behave virtuously. Crucially, understanding why psychopaths cannot be moral gives us a better understanding of what makes our own moral machinery tick—and the concept of dignity is, I argue, an essential component to our moral makeup.

I start this section by defining the term “psychopath”. I then offer a couple of thought experiments to make clear that we probably do have what I term a “dignity lens”. I test this claim against some objections, including those that could be posed by Ruth Macklin and Steven Pinker. I end with some musings on the neurological basis of psychopathy—and thus, if I am right, the neurological basis of what is needed to give us a dignity. The importance of this latter discussion will become more apparent in my later chapter on transhumanism. Briefly, though, I suspect that a case can be made—and I indeed make this case later in this thesis—for the view that radical human enhancement can in fact make more prominent what it is that gives us (contemporary humans) a dignity.

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Though many philosophers object to this reductionist view of moral behaviour,[59] my argument regarding the existence of a dignity lens fortunately does not stand or fall on the basis of these reductionist claims of neuroscience. This is because I am offering a philosophical (specifically, a phenomenological) understanding of morality that is, happily, consistent with scientific consensus on these matters. This is thus a strength of the novel philosophical outlook I forward in this section regarding our dignity-bearing characteristics.

5.3.1. Exhibit A: The psychopath

The term "psychopathy" was brought into popular consciousness largely due to American psychiatrist Hervey M. Cleckley's book, *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues about the So-Called Psychopathic Personality*, first published in 1941. Cleckley notes that certain individuals—psychopaths—seemed outwardly normal, even exemplary examples of human beings, but are in fact lacking in many if not all of the essential components of humanity. Cleckley seems to share my intuitions regarding the connection between caring (which involves opening oneself up to negative emotions like shame, guilt, and remorse) and dignity:

> Whether judged in the light of his conduct, of his attitude, or of material elicited in psychiatric examination, he shows almost no sense of shame. His career is always full of exploits, any one of which would wither even the more

[59] For a recent book-length case against the reductionist view of moral behaviour, see Wiseman (2016).

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> callous representatives of the ordinary man. Yet he does not, despite his able protestations, show the slightest evidence of major humiliation or regret. This is true of matters pertaining to his personal and selfish pride and to esthetic standards that he avows as well as to moral or humanitarian matters. (Cleckley 1988:343)

Unlike us, the psychopath is not filled with self-loathing when he destroys even that which the ordinary person would care for very deeply. This leads Cleckley to express a sentiment I discuss in depth in this section: "If Santayana is correct in saying that 'perhaps the true dignity of man is his ability to despise himself,' the psychopath is without a means to acquire true dignity" (Cleckley 1988:343). Relatedly, in not being able to meaningfully comprehend what it means to be moral, this comes at a cost to his *value*. Nozick argues that the immoral person "is a less valuable being than a moral one" (1981:409). He means this in a "nontrivial" sense: The immoral person "pays the cost of having a less valuable existence" (1981:409). Though Nozick is not explicitly referring to a full-blown psychopath with these claims, it often sounds like he has one in mind! The immoral person, as Nozick imagines him, is "worse off" for being immoral, but "[h]is not caring about value is also part of the cost he is paying […] not caring about value is itself something that diminishes his value" (1981:410).

Despite its popularity, the term "psychopathy" remains controversial in mental health circles. It is often used interchangeably with the term "sociopath", and I follow this convention here.[60] However, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) eschews

[60] Differences that are sometimes drawn between these labels, but they do not matter for my purposes. For one, the differences drawn between the two are largely behavioural, but they seem to share the

the term(s) in favour of "antisocial personality disorder". Their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V)*—the industry standard for diagnosing mental health conditions—list several criteria for the diagnosis of this condition, including: "Lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another" (American Psychiatric Association 2013:659).

Many experts, though, believe that psychopathy is a disorder that ought to be kept separate from antisocial personality disorder. Chief among the proponents of this view is Robert D. Hare.[61] Hare is the creator of the "gold standard" for diagnosing psychopathy, the *Hare Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-Revised).* This diagnostic tool also emphasises the psychopath's lack of remorse or guilt, his shallow emotional life, and lack of affective empathy. "Their hallmark," Hare says, "is a stunning lack of conscience" (Hare 1999:1). The psychopath is

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> a self-centered, callous, and remorseless person profoundly lacking in empathy and the ability to form warm emotional relationships with others, a person who functions without the restraints of conscience. If you think about it, you will realize that what is missing in this picture are the very qualities that allow human beings to live in social harmony. (Hare 1999:2)

same problematic psychological features—primarily a severely diminished (or absent) conscience. In the main text, I unpack what it is that gives us ordinary folk a conscience—and thus a dignity.

[61] See, for example, Hare et al. (1991), and also Cook et al. (2004), and Ogloff et al. (2014).

Emotional responses like fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, and affective empathy serve a useful function: they constrain our behaviour, effectively making it harder for us to intentionally perform acts that most would consider to be morally wrong. The psychopath, though, not only lacks these built-in affective constraints—together constituting "the mainsprings of conscience" (Hare 1999:76)—but also does not think anything is wrong with his shallow affect:

> "Guilt?" [notorious serial killer Ted Bundy] remarked in prison. "It's this mechanism we use to control people. It's an illusion. It's a kind of social control mechanism and it's very unhealthy. It does terrible things to our bodies. And there are much better ways to control our behaviour than that rather extraordinary use of guilt" (Bundy quoted in Michaud and Aynesworth 1989:288).

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Unfortunately for his victims, the psychopath can appear very empathetic, and thus trustworthy. However, while his capacity for *cognitive* empathy might be excellent, he is almost entirely devoid of *affective* empathy. The former type of empathy ("cognitive") refers to the ability to recognise emotions in other people, and to know how to respond appropriately. This is dependent on the accuracy of our "theory of mind"—the ability to make good inferences as to what other people are thinking. The latter type of empathy ("affective") refers to the tendency to be emotionally affected by another person's feelings. Psychopaths tend to be very convincing at feigning emotional responses, when they are in fact relatively devoid of emotion. Johns and

Quay note that the shallow affect of the psychopath suggests that he is "one who knows the words but not the music" (1962:2017).

The point to take home here is that the psychopath apparently cannot *care* about the same cluster of values that we typically care about. He might be able to recognise the existence of these values, but "values" them only insofar as he can use them instrumentally—as mere means toward fulfilling his own ends. Note the instinctive reaction we have to his worldview: it is chilling to us to realise that he is not similarly moved to respect the goods we find ourselves most compelled to cherish, preserve, and protect. He can take lives or molest children, and, when he is caught, calmly look people in the eye, displaying no shame or guilt, and no evident *sense* of the moral wrongness of his actions. It is as if he is from another world, a being who, if he is capable of caring for anyone or anything but himself, can presumably only care for a completely alien set of values. "I just take what's available," said one of Hare's subjects, a man who was convicted of sexually assaulting his girlfriend's eight-year-old daughter (Hare 1999:110).

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Lacking the ability to care about the same cluster of values as we do, the psychopath manages an impossible feat: he views people as mere objects. In his book, *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty* (2011), Cambridge Professor of developmental psychopathology, Simon Baron-Cohen, recalls a chilling fact revealed to him as a child about the capacity for evil that some individuals possess:

> When I was seven years old, my father told me the Nazis had turned Jews into lampshades. Just one of those comments that you hear once, and the thought *never goes away*. To a child's mind (even to an adult's) these two types of things just don't belong together. He also told me the Nazis turned Jews into bars of soap. It sounds so unbelievable, yet it is actually true. I knew our family was Jewish, so this image of *turning people into objects* felt a bit close to home. (Baron-Cohen 2013:1; author's emphasis)[62]

Turning people into objects is, I argue here, something *our* minds ordinarily cannot conceive of. This is because our (non-psychopathic) minds tend to instinctively consider people as the very opposite of mere objects; our minds consider them as beings imbued with a superlative, intrinsic worth—that is, a dignity. We are, in fact, "natural-born dignitarians", to coin a phrase.

5.3.2. *The dignity lens*

As I argue for it, the dignity lens isn't merely a sensory category—it doesn't merely highlight certain entities in our field of vision; it is also a normativising capacity: it assigns values to the items in our field of perception, and, crucially, it constrains our behaviour (care) toward respecting items of intrinsic value. A well-informed and

[62] Cambridge developmental psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen has done pioneering work in the study of autism, psychopathy, and the related issue of empathy. One of his books, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (1997), focusses on cognitive empathy and autism, while another book, *The Essential Difference* (2004), looks at affective empathy, and how it its expression differs in males versus females.

sober-minded person with a dignity lens finds it immensely difficult to knowingly harm intrinsically valuable goods. On the other hand, remove the dignity lens from a person, and his transformation from a symbiotic being into a parasitic one is all but complete. What follows is a thought experiment intended to make the existence of our dignity lens clearer. Consider how three types of individuals—I have in mind an ordinary person, a psychopath, and a psychopath+—might respond to the following scenario:

> <u>*Burning Building*</u>
>
> *A building, perhaps an orphanage, is on fire. If you were to enter a certain room in this building, you would see four things more clearly than anything else (apart from the smoke and flames):* ***A puppy*** *whimpering sadly in a corner,* ***a young child*** *(you can't quite guess her age) choking on the fumes in another corner,* ***a pile of cash*** *(which, even at a glance, looks to amount to a small fortune), and* ***a priceless painting*** *(perhaps* The Concert*, by Johannes Vermeer). There is plainly only enough time to save either the puppy, infant, cash, or painting from the leaping flames. What would* you *do? What* should *you do?*

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Most people, I would like to think, would instinctively move to save the young child. Even if they became momentarily tempted by the cash or the painting (if they were, say, an art critic), and even though they might regret not being able to save the puppy too, most people would find themselves, in a real sense, unable to bring themselves to allow the child to die. I would explain this as arising from our capacity to care about

a certain cluster of values, and to recognise hierarchical structures within that cluster of values. I submit that the best way to understand why we are compelled to save the child is to take seriously the possibility that we intuitively categorise human beings as things of a superlative, intrinsic value demanding respect. Macklin and Pinker, and utilitarians (and some kinds of Buddhists), would disagree, as I discuss shortly.

Whilst most of us—set aside the reason(s) *why* for a moment—would almost certainly move to save the child, and subsequently be satisfied that we did what ought to have been done (though still perhaps wish that we could have done more), try to imagine what it would be like to encounter this scenario as an individual who truly is not able to care about value as most of us tend to. Recall that the psychopath+ is completely value-blind; he would perceive the burning building scenario in a vastly different manner to us. Whereas we would immediately be compelled to save the child, and regret not being able to save the puppy too, the psychopath+ is unable to understand why we would be driven to act this way.

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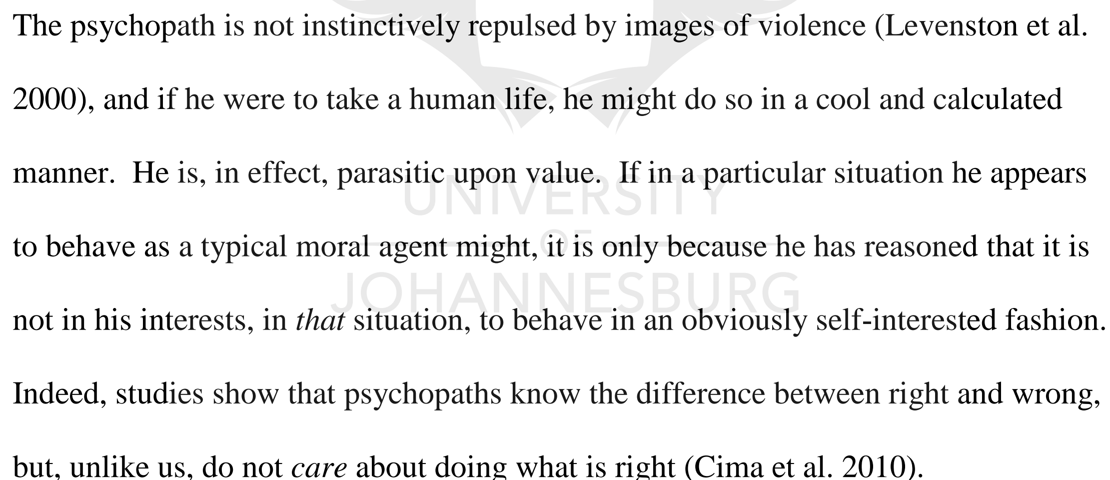
Suppose the psychopath+ decides to walk into the burning building one day out of sheer boredom. Unlike us, though, he might not intuit the items in this building as manifestly *human* artifacts, distinct from, say rocks or shrubs. A patch of moss behind a painting by Vermeer might strike him as no less uninteresting than the painting concealing it. (Even prehistoric cave paintings would not affect him in the slightest.) The psychopath+ perceives no distinction in value between these things. Instinctively moving his body to avoid the discomfort of the heat of the flames, he would stand in the burning room containing the child, puppy, cash, and priceless

painting, and not instinctively categorise these items (though he might do so descriptively, in terms of a purely physical language)—let alone categorise them normatively and be moved to protect some things in the room before others.

Now consider how an ordinary psychopath would respond to the burning room scenario. Unlike his completely value-blind cousin, the garden variety psychopath *can* distinguish between (others') values—perhaps due to observing others during his upbringing—but in the final analysis, he does not *care* about them. If he is smart, he has learnt that it is in his interest to *feign* care. Unbeknownst to most people around him, though, he only "cares" insofar as people and things have *instrumental* value *to him*.



The psychopath is not instinctively repulsed by images of violence (Levenston et al. 2000), and if he were to take a human life, he might do so in a cool and calculated manner. He is, in effect, parasitic upon value. If in a particular situation he appears to behave as a typical moral agent might, it is only because he has reasoned that it is not in his interests, in *that* situation, to behave in an obviously self-interested fashion. Indeed, studies show that psychopaths know the difference between right and wrong, but, unlike us, do not *care* about doing what is right (Cima et al. 2010).

What is more—and this is crucial—unlike us, there are no instinctive constraints upon his ability to annihilate intrinsically valuable things. Unlike us, the psychopath does not experience the same gut-wrenching feeling of horror, the same crippling feelings of shame and guilt, that we tend to do when we discover that we have harmed, wasted, or destroyed something of (intrinsic) value.

It might be suggested that psychopaths can care about the non-relational goods on Frankena's list, particularly power and experiences of achievement, self-expression, and adventure and novelty. If this is so, ought I concede that they do in fact have (a kind of) dignity? My hunch is that having a dignity ought to be associated primarily with the relational goods on Frankena's list. In any event, consider the plausible claim that a psychopath "cares" about the *non*-relational goods only insofar as acquiring such goods assuage his boredom (adventure and novelty), or are seen by the psychopath as mere means toward making himself appear more attractive or impressive to others (power and experiences of achievement). That is to say, I wonder if he is able to see these goods as having intrinsic value, as opposed to mere instrumental value to him as tools to achieve his own ends.

The psychopath's gaze reveals what is to us hidden in plain sight. We, unlike the psychopath, have a dignity lens. Let me further motivate for this using another case. Imagine you have just entered an art gallery full of people. What do you see? On one level of perception, you see people, paintings, statues. On another level, you have a different kind of "vision": You "see" distinctions in value between the various items in your surroundings.

You see stories—biographies of failure and triumph. You are affected by these narratives, and moved to awe and reverence by the power of the human spirit to overcome adversity, and to arise from those despairing depths boldly wielding works of great beauty. You marvel at the mastery of form and medium—works

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transcending the limitations of human form, like fists held defiantly up toward the silence of the heavens.

You feel connected to a rich history of human meaning-making, and at the same time feel a profound humility at your own insignificance. You might also find yourself filled with a courageous drive to protect and preserve this testament to your species' superlative value—each work of art shining resplendently with the unmistakable signature of dignified *human* hands.

Perhaps you wistfully turn to your side, and imagine a former friend or lover standing there. You wish that you could share this experience with him or her. Though you might struggle to articulate the feeling, you experience an affirmation of your *humanity*.

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Now imagine how a psychopath standing next to you might experience the same scene. Cleckley observes that for the psychopath

> [i]t is impossible for him to take even a slight interest in the tragedy or joy or the striving of humanity as presented in serious literature or art. He is also indifferent to all these matters in life itself. Beauty and ugliness, except in a very superficial sense, goodness, evil, love, horror, and humour have no actual meaning, no power to move him. He is, furthermore, lacking in the ability to see that others are moved. *It is as though he were colourblind*, despite his

sharp intelligence, to this aspect of human existence. It cannot be explained to him because there is nothing in his orbit of awareness that can bridge the gap with comparison. He can repeat the words and say glibly that he understands, and there is no way for him to realize that he does not understand. (Cleckley 1988:40; my emphasis)

To you, the world is value-laden in a way the "colourblind" psychopath—let alone the psychopath+—literally cannot even imagine. He is unmoved by what affects you so deeply that you might be reduced to tears.[63] The psychopath can conceive of perhaps only one sort of value in the room: instrumental value. The people in the room are to him distinct only insofar as they offer some sort of uniquely desirable instrumental value to him. (People can satisfy his sexual needs, for example; sculptures cannot.) Though he might not wholly be lacking in aesthetic appreciation, he does not experience our meaningful connection to the human project, let alone an affirmation of his humanity.

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Like the Taliban destroying the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001,[64] he ultimately lacks our profound appreciation for the history of human existence, and for its continued existence; like them, he does not see any moral wrongness in the

[63] During a recent visit to a museum containing works by Vincent Van Gogh, including detailed documentation of the affectionate correspondence between him and his brother, I was reduced to a sobbing mess. I can therefore confirm, Dear Reader, that I am (probably) not a psychopath.

[64] Reportedly, after failing to destroy the giant statues using tanks and artillery shells, the Taliban forced prisoners to help them plant explosives. According to one prisoner, Mirza Hussain, who was then 26, the Taliban treated the prisoners "like people who could be disposed of at any time." Hussain claims that the Taliban were chillingly ruthless: "Once I witnessed one of the men who had a bad leg and couldn't carry the explosives any more […] the Taliban shot him on the spot and gave the body to another prisoner to dispose of" (Behzad and Qarizadah 2015).

annihilation of the art gallery in which you and he are standing. (The psychopath+, of course, cannot distinguish between value even in this limited manner. To him, the room is full of things—distinguishable only in terms of shapes, colours, etc.)

But suppose we are to give the psychopath a special pair of glasses. Let us call them "dignity glasses". With them on, he is now suddenly aware of people in a new, non-instrumental way. Now, the people in the room shine brightly with a new sort of value. It takes a while for his "eyes" to adjust to this new value, and he finds himself profoundly affected by it, profoundly driven to preserve and protect it. He is no longer able to see the people in the room as mere means to an end. Something in him is now disgusted by his former orientation, which judged people only in terms of their instrumental value to him. The dignity glasses have cured the psychopath of his "dignity blindness".

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To be sure, he was always aware that people had interests; he simply didn't care about their interests. He was always aware of their autonomy; he simply did not care to respect it. He was aware, too, of their desires to avoid pain and to seek pleasure or happiness; but, apart from how his awareness of these psychological features in others helped him advance his own interests, he ultimately didn't care about respecting peoples' capacities for pain or pleasure.

To summarise, from ascending capacity to care about value:

1) The psychopath+ lacks the capacity to distinguish between values, let alone the capacity to care about value. He is completely value-blind.

2) The psychopath can conceivably distinguish between final values other than his own satisfaction, perhaps due to observing others during his upbringing, but does not *care* about them. He *feigns* care and affect in general. He only "cares" insofar as people and things have instrumental value to him. He is ultimately parasitic. The emotional responses (shame, guilt, fear, grief, and anxiety) that serve to control our behaviour, and thereby direct us toward being morally good, are absent in him.

3) As ordinary people, we can distinguish between values, and we care about them. Our moral lives involve strong emotional responses. We often find himself having to make gut-wrenching, heart-breaking decisions ("Oh no! I have to leave the puppy behind!"). Failures to treat intrinsically valuable goods with the appropriate degree of respect tends to produce in us very unpleasant feelings of guilt or shame. Additionally, we tend to find it difficult to willingly harm or lie to other people; the very thought of doing so can produce in us feelings of anxiety, dread, or fear.

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6. Objections to the new understanding of human dignity

It could be that I am correct in believing that the concept of dignity serves an indispensable purpose in bioethics, but I might still be in error with regard to the picture I have presented of what gives us a dignity. Therefore, in this chapter, I examine four objections to my understanding of dignity. The first objection comes from Kantians, who might argue that dignity cannot be used to argue for defending procreation in this manner, as respect for dignity does not provide reasons to create the thing with dignity.

The remaining three objections focus on the dignity lens, as I call it, and the role I think it plays in being virtuous. And so, the second objection I discuss in this section looks at ways in which Macklin, Pinker, and utilitarians like Peter Singer would plausibly respond to my views. Third, I address the possibility that I might be conflating two concepts—moral patienthood and moral agency—that ought to be kept distinct. Fourth, I respond to the objection that I am offering an argument that leads to an unintuitive conclusion.

6.1 Initial concerns from the Kantian

I should acknowledge an objection that a Kantian might level at my strategy, one that appeals to the difference between respecting insofar as it concerns a good that already exists, and one that does not yet exist. Kantians might point out that very few friends of dignity think we should procreate as much as possible. They would argue that this

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is because respect for dignity does not provide reason to create the thing with the dignity.

Consider the following interpretation of foundational aspects Kant's ethics, which helps illustrate the above concerns. Barbara Herman (1992) reads Kant as saying the following regarding the value of our rational nature, which has a particular kind of worth (namely dignity):

> [M]ore instantiations of rational nature do not enhance the value content of the world, and more instances of respect for rational nature do not move anything or anyone along a scale of dignity [because] there is no such scale. (Herman 1992:238)

As I understand the first clause of this sentence, we cannot "add" to the "amount" of dignity in a world containing beings with dignity, because dignity is not a value of this sort.[65] And so, it would seem that a consequence of this view is that we cannot be said to have a duty to create more (instances) of this sort of value, only a duty to protect the value of this sort that is already in the world. And this helps explain why many Kantians have difficulties explaining duties to produce goods (such as persons), and have tended to deny that we have any duty to procreate. Here, many Kantians would argue that we only have duties to those who exist, or will come to exist (or have existed).[66]

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[65] Herman refers to the value of dignity *qua* rational nature as being both absolute and "nonscalar" (1993:238).

[66] For example, see Weinberg (2013). For the view that merely possible people are also morally relevant, see Hare (2007).

In reply to the Kantian, I should stress that I am not utilising a Kantian conception of dignity. Though, in at least one important respect, my understanding of dignity does pair with Kant's (namely, dignity is a superlative, intrinsic value worthy of respect), I do not claim to be deriving the understanding of dignity I defend from his writings. Rather, I think of myself as giving a phenomenological description of how ordinary people might experience themselves as beings with dignity. And *this* description does not preclude the possibility that bringing beings with dignity (as I describe them) adds value of a very special sort to the world. In light of this description, it is not clear to me that to make beings with dignity is merely to treat them with respect.

I should be clear, however, that I am not arguing for the view that we ought to bring in as many beings with dignity into the world as is (reasonably) possible (given resource constraints, etc.). Rather, I am trying to motivate for the view that dignity, as I describe it, prohibits us from allowing the world to be devoid of beings with this sort of value.

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Let us return to Herman, this time the second clause of her sentence interpreting Kant, namely: "[…] and more instances of respect for rational nature do not move anything or anyone along a scale of dignity [because] there is no such scale" (Herman 1993:238). This appears to be speaking to the Kantian conception of dignity as inviolable. Most human rights documents would interpret dignity in such a fashion—namely, as an inviolable worth all humans possess in equal measure, and which and cannot be purchased or sold.

But the Kantian conception of dignity, so stated, struggles to explain how people sometimes feel like their dignity has been violated. For how could this be so, if dignity is inviolable (if there is only one kind of dignity)?[67] Recall that I have argued that we can sensibly differentiate between several different conceptions of dignity (and have suggest what ties them together). The Kantian conception of dignity—at least, insofar as it relates to that aspect of dignity which is an inviolable worth in every human being—is but one conception of dignity, and other conceptions might be useful in a given context. For example, when considering, say, political rights in a democracy, it might be fitting to appeal to the Kantian conception of dignity. However, in a biomedical context, the "dignity as flourishing" model might often be more useful. And in terms of demonstrating why we should not allow ourselves to go extinct as a species, and how we might go about this permissibly, my suggested version of dignity will be of some use.

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6.2. Objections from Macklin, Pinker, and utilitarians

Note that Burning Building asks two questions, namely: 1) what *would* you do?, and 2) what *should* you to do? I have not as yet attempted to answer the second question directly. Instead, I have implied that, in this case at least, we ought to do what comes instinctively—that is, try to save the child. Critics might agree with me that most people would instinctively move to save the child, but they might disagree with me over the reasons why we would instinctively act in such a fashion. Further, they

[67] Suzy Killmister (2010:161) advances similar lines of enquiry.

might give different reasons why we ought to save the child (assuming that they agree we ought to do this).

To be clear, we are now making a distinction between three questions: 1) what *would* you do?, 2) *why* would you do it?, and 3) what, all things considered, *should* you do? My own suggested answers are that 1) most people would try to save the child; and they would act in such a manner because 2) we (neurotypical) human beings have a dignity lens that both makes us tend to value certain entities in the world over others, as well as affectively constrain and direct our behaviour in morally important ways; and that 3) we should follow our instincts here and act in a manner that respects the kind of beings we are—namely beings that recognise and care about the superlative value (dignity) of other human beings.

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In terms of these same three questions, the utilitarian could deny that we need to posit the existence of a dignity lens. Focussing on the first two questions, the utilitarian could instead argue that her "instinctive" reaction to save the child would arise through the cultivation of utilitarian-friendly reasoning or rules of action, until they become everyday habits or virtues. On the other hand, a preference utilitarian might argue that our instinctive move toward saving the child is evidence of our inherent speciesism, but that saving the child would nonetheless be judged as morally good on preference utilitarian grounds—provided the child has developed cognitive capacity for holding preferences (which we perhaps ought to assume that she has).[68]

[68] Infamously, Singer has defended the moral permissibility of infanticide, on the grounds that infants lack the capacity to hold preferences (2011:151-154).

To be clear, many utilitarians, focussing on the third question, would want to argue that we ought to save the child, but would appeal to values other than dignity—specifically, happiness or preferences. I should note, though, that not all utilitarians would want to argue that we ought to save the child; some might advise us to put the decision to a coin toss, or they might want to know whether the child would come to live a very unpleasant life. And Macklin and Pinker would presumably argue that the concept of respect for persons can explain why we ought to save the child (though I am not clear how this concept has much normative force without being underwritten by the intuition that human beings have a dignity). But I am not convinced that these responses succeed in showing that the concept of dignity can be done away with.

Here is the general problem I see with adherents of these "dignity is superfluous" views. They nonetheless assume that we (as moral agents) can a) recognise values, b) view hierarchical distinctions (that is *evaluate*) between these values, and c) care for certain values over others (namely intrinsic, and thus inherently normative, values). As my analysis of psychopathy has demonstrated, though, these are not assumptions to be taken for granted. Far from it. Viewed in the light in which I am suggesting they be viewed, the capacities (a), (b), and (c) are of great normative significance. These capacities suggest the existence of the dignity lens for which I have argued. They suggest that the ordinary person surveying the scene in the Burning Building scenario is a unique being in the natural world, because this individual views the world through a frame that makes it impossible for him not to care about a specific cluster of values.

It might be suggested that these capacities suggest, instead, the existence of a "welfarist lens". But here are a couple of reasons to doubt this alternative. We usually grieve at the loss of life (something that is intrinsically valuable), and we usually take only a little comfort in the thought that the deceased person will no longer suffer. This is particularly true in cases where healthy people die from accidents or relatively suddenly from illness. Further, if we only had a welfarist lens and not a dignity lens, we might be tempted to euthanize every sentient being in the world! Indeed, as I have been arguing, a thoroughgoing welfarism leads us to anti-natalism, which in turn leads us to the conclusion that it would be best, all things considered, if the human race went extinct. Though this is all too brief (I offer a more comprehensive response shortly), I am of the view that if we consider beings through a welfarist lens at all, it is *because* we are viewing them through the primary filter of our dignity lens. Our dignity lens, in other words, casts them as beings worthy of moral consideration—not mere means to an end.

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Consider the possibility that a psychopath might apply "utilitarian" reasoning in the Burning Building scenario to argue that we ought to save the priceless painting ("Because it will bring happiness to countless future generations!") from the flames ("The child and puppy are probably on their way out due to smoke inhalation anyway!").[69] Further, he might genuinely not understand why his reasoning would strike us as cold and deeply troubling.

[69] It might be suggested that I am being unfair to the utilitarian here. My aim, though, is not to accurately represent how a sane, non-psychopathic utilitarian would think through these matters. Rather, my aim is to offer a sensible description of a psychopath's "utilitarian" or "consequentialist" reasoning, in order to show how it would differ markedly from a true utilitarian's (*moral*) reasoning in such cases. The psychopath knows the words, but not the music, to utilitarian moral reasoning.

It turns out that there have been some scientific investigations into this kind of "cold" moral reasoning—and it might not make the utilitarian very happy. Before examining these studies, though, it is necessary to recall some classic moral dilemmas. Consider, first, the most basic version of the trolley problem, first introduced by Philippa Foot, in which we are asked what we would do if thrust into the following situation:

> Trolley Problem
>
> *A trolley is hurtling toward five innocent bystanders. The trolley will certainly kill all of them, but they unfortunately cannot get out of its path. You, though, are in a position to help them. Within your reach is a switch that can divert the trolley onto another track, thereby saving the five people. There is one significant issue, though: If you divert the trolley onto the other track, you will send it hurtling toward another innocent individual who will not be able to escape its deadly trajectory.*

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Approximately 90% of people adopt what appears to be a consequentialist[70] moral solution when presented with this case: they think that it is permissible to flip the switch and kill the one person (Greene et al. 2001; Greene et al. 2004; Valdesolo & DeSteno 2006; Hauser et al. 2007; Mikhail 2007). It is generally thought that, ideally, people should be consistent in their moral reasoning, but the following case shows that most people fall far short of this ideal (supposing consequentialism best explains

[70] I switch from "utilitarianism" to the broader term, "consequentialism"—which can be defined as the moral outlook which defines the right in terms of promoting the good. I make this move, because though the studies (by non-philosophers) I discuss shortly in the main text favour the term "utilitarian", not all utilitarians would agree that it is right to push the fat man off the bridge (rule utilitarians, for example).

Trolley Problem). The following is a variation of the Trolley Problem, one proposed by Judith Jarvis Thomson (1985:1409):

> *Fat Man*[71]
>
> *As in* Trolley Problem*, you observe a trolley hurtling toward five innocent people. This time, though, you are standing on a footbridge watching the potential tragedy unfold, and there is no switch at hand to divert the trolley. You realise that the only way to stop the trolley is to drop a heavy weight into its path. There happens to be a really fat man standing next to you. He is leaning over, watching the trolley as it is about to pass under your footbridge and on toward the five people. If you were but simply to shove him over the edge, he would land on the tracks, and his body would stop the hurtling trolley. Shoving the fat man off the footbridge and into the path of the trolley would kill him, but it would also save the lives of the five people. Would it be permissible to shove him off the footbridge?*

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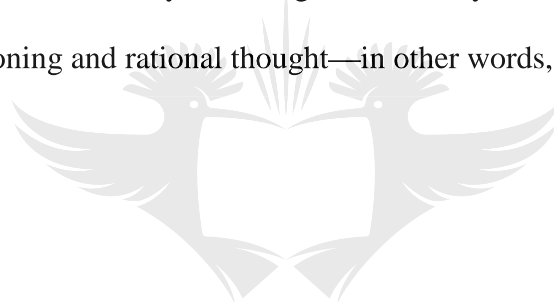
Unlike with the Trolley Problem, when presented with the Fat Man case, most people do not think it is permissible to kill one person to save five. If fact, up to 90% of people do not think a consequentialist response—kill one to save five—would be permissible in this case (Mikhail 2007). But what about the 10% of people who think it would be permissible to shove the fat man off the bridge? Who are they? I return to this question shortly.

[71] This is my reworded version of the moral dilemma.

Philosophers have been discussing these moral dilemmas for a few decades now; in recent years, neuroscientists have also taken an interest in them. A functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) investigation into the role of emotions in moral judgement (Greene et al. 2001) makes some interesting claims. The authors hypothesise that people tend to treat the two moral dilemmas above very differently due to emotional responses: the idea of pushing the fat man to his death is "more emotionally salient" than the thought of flipping the switch that will similarly kill one person (Greene et al. 2001:2106). The authors consider the Trolley Problem to be a "moral-impersonal" dilemma (Greene et al. 2001:2106). When presented with such dilemmas, participants in the study showed greater activity in areas of their brains associated with reasoning and rational thought—in other words, areas useful to cognitive empathy.



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The Fat Man case, on the other hand, is a "moral-personal" dilemma (Greene et al. 2001:2106). In the study, such dilemmas elicited greater activity in areas of the brain associated with the processing of emotions—areas, in other words, useful to affective empathy. How might psychopathic individuals react to these moral dilemmas, though? What sort of activity could we observe in *their* brains? Recall that the average person tends to be inconsistent in terms of their moral reasoning, favouring a consequentialist solution to the Trolley Case, and a deontological (or perhaps a "do-nothing") one to the Fat Man case.[72] The typical psychopath, however, is a chillingly

[72] Note that I am not suggesting that the cases are parallel. Certainly, most deontologists, at least, would want to highlight that there are morally relevant differences between redirecting an impersonal harm toward an innocent patient and pushing an innocent patient into harm's way.

consistent "consequentialist": he has no issue proposing that it is permissible to kill one person for the sake of other people.

A study by Daniel M. Bartels and David A. Pizarro (2011) concludes that there is a significant correlation between a consistent preference for (ostensibly) consequentialist moral solutions and traits like psychopathy and Machiavellianism. This is not to say that your obstinately utilitarian colleague is a psychopath, for—at the risk of stating the obvious—it is possible to arrive at utilitarian conclusions through the process of careful rational deliberation; one need not be a consequentialist to think it right to flip the switch in the Trolley case.

However, it is also possible to arrive at such conclusions as the result of decidedly immoral tendencies. Recall that 10% of people would push the fat man off the bridge. Some of these people might sincerely be aiming at the best possible solution, and might genuinely regret the fact that moral reasoning leads them to a conclusion that will lead to the death of the fat man. Some of the people in this group, however, might feel no such regret: the emotional centres of their brains might remain cold, as it were, to the thought of the fat man's death.[73] Psychopaths play the "game" of morality as though all the pieces on the board ultimately have the same value: every person, animal, and object, is essentially a pawn.

[73] Or, some members of this psychopathic fraction of the "pushers" might be excited at the thought of committing murder!

To be clear, I am not arguing that a psychopath would in fact be using utilitarian or consequentialist moral reasoning when he concludes that we ought to push the fat man off the bridge. Rather, I am merely suggesting that his reasoning might give off the appearance of consequentialist moral reasoning (the words), but ultimately lack the substance (the music).[74]

To bring the discussion back to my proposed "dignity lens" hypothesis, it might be suggested that what best explains our preference to save the child in Burning Building might be a sort of "welfarist" or "utilitarian" lens. For it could be the case that we are motivated to save the child through some sort of instinctive awareness, which may be mistaken in this case, of the enhanced experiential capacities of the child (over the puppy). Further, it may be that we are motivated by an instinctive awareness that the child has the greater potential to promote utility, and that her continued existence may be of greater benefit to the world. But even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that such utilitarian moral calculations can be made instinctively, here are three reasons to doubt this alternative "welfarist/utilitarian lens" hypothesis.

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First, it could be argued that we move to save the child because we recognise that she has the potential to increase utility. But in order for us to be able to do this, we first must have the ability to detect, appraise, and (most importantly) care about value. This is a very unique ability, hidden in plain sight; it is, I have been arguing, a

[74] Recall the Johns and Quay quote: "[A [psychopath] knows the words but not the music" (1962:2017).

function of our dignity lens. Recall, that these considerations of value, instinctive for us, are impossible for a psychopath.

To further explain the above, consider that though he might be able to instinctively judge that the child ought to be saved, the psychopath (or someone with but a "utilitarian lens" capable of utilitarian calculus, but not moral affect) might not *care* (enough) to be moved to action. What is more, though the "value" being promoted by saving the child is (expected) happiness or pleasure, and some might object to me using "value" in this fashion, note that the psychopath ultimately cares only about his own happiness or pleasure. Recognising that *someone else's* happiness and pleasure matters—in this case, the expected welfare of the child, as well as any benefits her existence might bring to the world—requires, I submit, the capacity to care about value. That is to say, this recognition requires something like my proposed "dignity lens".

As a second reason to doubt the "welfarist/utilitarian lens" hypothesis, consider that fact that we usually grieve at the loss of human life (something that is intrinsically valuable), and that we usually take only a little comfort in the thought that the deceased person will no longer suffer. This is particularly true in cases where healthy people die from accidents or relatively suddenly from illness. This would not be the case if we only had a welfarist lens. Often, rightly or wrongly, we seek to save a person's life even if we are fairly certain that we cannot also preserve his or her quality of life. For example, our instinct to save a child in a real life burning building would remain even if we were sure that she had already been terribly, but non-fatally,

scarred by the flames. In other words, in both our instinctive moral reactions as well as our more considered moral evaluations, we often give greater priority to non-welfarist considerations.

Third, the dignity lens hypothesis offers us the simplest explanation for our intuitions in scenarios like Burning Building. Or consider any scenario where we are forced to choose between harming one of two beings who are both equally capable of pain. Perhaps we find ourselves forced to run over either a dog or a human being.[75] One of these beings seems intuitively more important than the other—and this intuition persists even if the human being in question is a stranger, and the dog is our beloved family companion, Beethoven. Utilitarianism typically faces difficulties with such scenarios. Or what if we had to choose between harming an ordinary person and a psychopath (whom we know to be a psychopath only due to brain scans, but who has not, so far as we know, harmed or threatened to harm others)? I submit that the simplest way to explain why we intuit that one being has an intrinsic worth and that the other does not, is to appeal to something like the dignity lens hypothesis.

Our dignity lens, then, casts them as beings worthy of moral consideration, rather than mere variables. I should also point out that if we only had a welfarist lens and not a dignity lens—or if we had both, but privileged the welfarist lens over the dignity lens—then it would be hard to object to a pro-mortal argument that we ought to euthanize every sentient being in the world. This presumes, of course, that we

[75] This case is inspired by one presented by Thaddeus Metz (2006:227). Instead of a dog, he uses a squirrel, but not driving over the person is still, he asserts, the intuitively obvious decision.

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adopted the Benatarian position that the benefits of existence are not outweighed by the bad. Indeed, as I have been arguing, a thoroughgoing welfarism would indeed lead us to this down this path toward an anti-natal as well as pro-mortal conclusion.

6.3. Objections regarding the role of the dignity lens vis-à-vis moral agency

There is a distinction to be made between what makes us moral patients, on the one hand, and what gives us moral agency, on the other. It could be argued that with my dignity lens hypothesis, I am conflating this distinction.

But I think such an objection arises out of a misunderstanding of the role I think our dignity lens has in animating, as it were, our moral nature. To be clear I *am* suggesting that our dignity lens both puts us in a unique category of moral patients, and that it is essential to our moral agency. In the case of the former, having a dignity lens makes us beings of superlative moral consideration. *However*—and this is the crucial part—in the case of the latter, seeing the world through a dignity lens does not just mean "seeing": It means having the normatively rich phenomenological experience of being a human moral agent. To my mind, without that which makes a human being a moral patient (which includes, but is not limited to, the capacity to care about value), one cannot truly be said to "be" a moral agent. That is to say, having a dignity (as I ground it) is essential for being a moral agent.[76]

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[76] At least insofar as the person in question is a member of the human community, and has the capacity to care about the values of this community. I acknowledge that there is some evidence that other animals have a kind of moral sense that serves some purpose to their species (de Waal 1996). But

To see why I think it is the case that individuals who lack the capacity to care about value cannot be described as fully fledged moral agents, imagine two individuals: 1) A non-psychopathic, rule-following agent who always austerely aims at acting out of a sense of duty (perhaps Kant himself); and 2) a psychopath who aims to always act according to the sorts of moral principles he imagines a morally good person would follow (perhaps he has studied Kant, and is, in fact, able to consistently reason in a recognisably Kantian manner).[77] My intuitions lead me to believe that only Agent 1 can truly be moral even if their actions are identical.

Agent 2 can *act* as a moral agent would (maybe even better than most non-psychopaths), but I am of the view that he can never *be* a moral agent. Part of what explains my intuition here, I think, is that Agent 2 does not, and *can*not, *care* about being morally good (for the sake of being morally good). Even though he might behave exactly as a Kantian moral agent might, he does not do so out of a desire to be moral—to "do the right thing"—for he is marooned from the terra firma of morality, namely the affective dimension of our (neurotypical) moral nature.

I do not even need to appeal to psychopathy to argue for this. Imagine a robot with "Kantian" AI. This machine could not be considered a "moral agent", in the intended sense of the term, unless we were somehow to program specific emotions into it. Moral agents *care* about being moral; they care, in other words, about certain values. We do not hold non-human animals or machines morally liable for harm, and

while we recognise this fact, and also the fact that we have moral responsibilities to animals, we do not think it reasonable to hold them morally accountable in the same way we would human beings.

[77] Consequentialists rejoice! It is now time for the deontologists to have their turn.

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temporary insanity, for example, is considered to be a mitigating factor in criminal cases. Even respect, for Kant, is a feeling.[78]

I am explicitly denying that morality can be cashed out in entirely in terms of following a set of rules that are discovered through *a priori* reasoning. Rather, my view is that *being* moral necessarily involves an affective component (namely the capacity to care about value).[79] Crucially, it is affect that motivates morally good behaviour. Even being motivated to be good out of a sense duty is, to my mind, to be motivated by an affect (albeit one of the better ones). Again, that is to say that the ability to be affected by a certain cluster of values (that is, "having a dignity"), is essential for being a moral agent.

Before proceeding, I ought to acknowledge some concerns that might be raised by the Kantian, because doing so will help me motivate the intuitions to which I am appealing to in my comparison of Agent 1 and Agent 2. In first section of the *Groundwork*, Kant famously makes a distinction between acting *from* duty, and acting *in accordance with* duty. Many of our acts that proceed in accordance with duty can still be said to have a moral character to them. But Kant believes that actions that proceed *from* duty are more manifestly moral—that is to say, it is more evident that

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[78] This is not an uncommon reading of Kant. See, for example, McCarthy (1993).
[79] The view that I am expressing is worthy of extended treatment in a separate project. However, what I will suggest here is that I am perhaps offering a third way between Kant (who thought that morality could be grounded in *a priori* principles), and David Hume (who though that reason was "a slave to the passions" [T 2.3.3.4)], and placed great emphasis on the primacy of the role of sentiment in ethics). On my view, neurotypical brains are structured in a fashion that makes certain acts very difficult to perform. This might help explain why, for example, it is incredibly difficult to intentionally kill another person (Grossman 1995). Or perhaps I am suggesting that emotions can be rational, contra standard readings of both thinkers. I anticipate that my thinking on this matter will evolve toward greater clarity!

such actions are performed with the intention of respecting the moral law. In response to my claims above regarding the basis of moral agency, the Kantian might challenge me by asking the following: Suppose someone performs an act because it is the right thing to do (that is, they perform it from duty), but without the affect (that I am claiming is essential to acting morally). Would he or she still be a bad person, or, perhaps, simply a non-good one?

My response is that I am very doubtful to whether we can coherently claim that someone can perform an act merely *because* it is the right thing to do—that is, act from duty in the Kantian sense (without any ulterior motive)—without the affect that I am claiming is essential to motivating moral behaviour. I understand why I think this is the case, consider a familiar example. Think of a desperately impoverished person, we will call her Olivia, who sees another person drop his wallet while walking by. She picks it up, and cannot help but notice that it is bulging with notes in large dominations. Even without counting the money, Olivia knows that it will help feed her for at least a couple of weeks, and this will perhaps allow her to get herself back on her feet (she has been seeking employment, but has found it difficult to present herself favourably to prospective employers in her current state).

But Olivia also believes that it would wrong of her to take what is not hers. She believes that if she chose not to call out to the man, so that he may retrieve his wallet and its contents, she would be stealing. (She is not afraid of getting caught, by the way, because no one around seems to have noticed what has happened to the man and his wallet). She believes this with such certainty that she does indeed call out to the

wallet's owner, and he does indeed turn back and collect it from her, offering Olivia his sincere gratitude in the form words, but not monetary rewards.

Kantians would correctly point out that Olivia's circumstances ought to make a difference to our evaluation of her actions. Olivia chooses to return the wallet despite potentially having had to fight strong (and what would have been very understandable) inclinations toward acting otherwise. And, for the Kantian, Olivia's circumstances highlight that she is acting from duty and not personal gain (etc.). Again, acting from duty is what, at base, gives acts their moral character, on this view.

But it is not yet clear that Olivia's action of returning the wallet straightforwardly proceeds from her conviction regarding the moral importance of acting from duty (or certain moral rules, laws, or maxims). To my mind, even if Olivia really does consider herself a Kantian, *in order for her to follow through* and act from duty, Olivia also has to possess to a certain (stoic) *attitude* toward maintaining her equanimity. For there are potentially *very strong affective states* at play here. Olivia is starving and alone, and she is very aware of her predicament and is fighting to improve her lot in life. Ideally, Olivia has to deal with these affective states without resorting to, and being helped by, such things as self-deception, cognitive dissonance, or disassociation. The awareness that she would be doing the right thing, according to her moral outlook, if she returned the wallet, would be cold comfort indeed.

But imagine that Olivia is well-versed in stoic philosophy (perhaps she carries around a tattered copy of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*), and is also very familiar with, and

persuaded by, Kantian moral theory. And perhaps, through years of meditation, she has been able to regulate her emotions to such a degree that when she returns the wallet to its rightful owner, she does so with exemplary calmness. Can we then coherently claim that she has done the right thing without being touched by the affect I am claiming is necessary for us to be moral agents?

Let us change the case a little. Imagine that Olivia is being pressured into keeping the wallet by certain people in her immediate vicinity. Perhaps they mock her for what they perceive to be a simpleminded insistence on following rules that, in this instance, will almost certainly leave her just as poor off as before she had found the large sum of money that is currently in her hands (for there is no reason to believe the owner of the wallet will thank her by rewarding her with money or some other material good). Further, imagine that they try to bully Olivia into giving them the wallet (they make no attempt to pretend they will return it to its owner—far from it).

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It would be reasonable to believe that ordinarily very stoical (but still all too human) Olivia might become a little upset. Perhaps Olivia feels her moral outlook being challenged, and her brain brings to the forefront of her consciousness the emotions that motivate her to (believe that she should) always try to act from duty. She is forced to *defend* her moral beliefs—perhaps to herself, as well—as she knows that merely telling her haranguers that she wants to return the wallet because “it is the right thing to do” will not satisfy them. But perhaps *her* resolve to “do the right thing” is bolstered now that these strong emotions have been stirred up in her.

Olivia could become aware of so-called moral rules, but without the requisite affective forces, she would not be motivated to follow them purely for the sake of doing the right thing. Olivia could become aware of so-called moral obligations, but not be moved to respect them purely because this would be the right thing to do. What comes to the fore here is that Olivia *cares* about doing the right thing. Moreover, she cares about doing the right thing *for the sake of doing the right thing*. She cares about acting from duty, whereas the people around her do not. Indeed, we can sensibly say of them that, as it pertains to deciding what should be done about the wallet, they seemingly do not care (enough) about acting according to duty.

To test these intuitions, imagine another possible world in which Olivia*, an impoverished psychopath, is attempting (for whatever reasons) to adopt the mindset of a Kantian. She sees a man dropping a bulging wallet. What will she do? Suppose that she is pretty sure that the man will not offer her any money as a reward (she can tell he is not the philanthropic type). And suppose she is really, really hungry, and this "doing the right thing" experiment has not proven to be very rewarding for her. Why think that her personal project of attempting to act like a believer in the moral theories of Kant would motivate her to proceed from (what she is told is) duty? What reasons could she give herself for why she ought not to take just one bill from the wallet ("He wouldn't even notice it!") before returning the rest?[80] After all, can she truly be said to *know* that returning the wallet would be the right thing to do if she

[80] Perhaps she has obsessive compulsive disorder, and cannot help but follow through with this project of "acting from duty". But I am not looking at reasons or motivations that proceed from cognitive impairments of any kind, or from irrational beliefs.

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does not actually *believe* this? What would motivate her to return the wallet with its contents untouched?

My hypothesis is that *Olivia* cannot act with a good will*. As a psychopath, Olivia* is unmoored from this moral touchstone. Again, I am doubtful that one can act with a good will without caring, at least at some crucial stage of the moral reasoning process, about doing the right thing. Suppose we knew Olivia (the non-psychopath) to be a virtuous person, and did not know that she had fallen on hard times. Were we to hear that she had not attempted to return a wallet she found, we would be surprised and disappointed, and would expect Olivia to feel some shame at her actions. But suppose we hear Olivia*, whom we know to be a psychopath, did not attempt to return a wallet. This would not surprise us, nor would her lack of shame about stealing or failing to follow through with her pledge to act from duty.

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This fits in with our intuitions surrounding suitable punishment for criminal psychopaths. We tend not to see the point of punishing people who seem incapable of understanding, *affectively*, why what they did was wrong, even if we are quick to keep them isolated from the public. To be sure, such persons might think that our moral judgements are (sometimes) reasonable, but they are ultimately incapable of caring about them as we do. There is a coldness, we think, in such a person. There is something essential missing in a person who cannot feel guilt or remorse for performing even the most heinous acts.

Once more, I should stress that our dignity lens is not merely a way of "seeing" the world; it is more akin to a normative filter through which we encounter the world, one that incorporates a set of rules, intuitions, emotional reactions, etc., which work together somehow to compel us toward a certain, recognisably human, moral outlook and way of being. It is when we come across individuals in whom this moral outlook is absent that we realise its essential connection to morality, and thus to our humanity.

It might be suggested that Agent 1, in attempting to act dispassionately, is removing affect from the equation. Thus, I am wrong that affect is essential to moral reasoning. But there is a difference between *thinking* that you have completely removed emotions from your moral reasoning, and *actually* doing so. Indeed, I am of the view that Agent 1 is motivated to behave morally because he *cares* about morality (for its own sake?). He is simply mistaken about his view that he can completely divorce his emotions from his moral reasoning. Michael Rosen tells us of an incident from Kant's final days:

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> It was nine days before his death and the great man [Kant] was old and desperately weak. Nevertheless, he refused to sit down before a guest (his doctor) had first taken a seat. When he was finally persuaded to do so, he said: "*Das Gefühl der Humanität hat mich noch nicht verlassen*" (The feeling of *humanity* has not yet left me). (Rosen 2012:160)

I would explain Kant's behaviour here in the following manner. Kant *cares* too much to bring himself to do what he thinks is not virtuous—in this case, taking a seat before

his guest has done so. I would suggest that in a similar situation, a deathly ill Agent 2 would conceivably not be able to motivate himself to put on the appearance of having deep respect for the humanity—the dignity—of another person; he would drop the façade due to sheer fatigue, and not wait for the doctor to sit first.

6.4. The unintuitiveness objection

I am aware that my view entails that psychopathic individuals cannot be said to have a dignity. Though some might think that my argument thus leads to a *reductio ad absurdum*, I in fact accept the view that full-blown psychopaths do not have a dignity. And I am not alone in concluding this. Metz (2012:397-398) argues for a similar point, the UN Declaration of 1948 grounds dignity on conscience, and even Kant himself would make the same claim, insofar as it is the capacity for morality that is constitutive of dignity for him. To be sure, there might be some latent capacity in psychopaths to care about the same cluster of values humans tend to, but until we find a way to turn it on, I maintain that they cannot be said to have a dignity.

On this point, it might be objected that I have painted a picture of the psychopath as a *de facto* predator, a parasite.[81] We do not ordinarily think there is any inherent wrongness to annihilating entities that are parasitic upon human beings (think of our

[81] Or rather, *endorsed* this picture—as most experts on psychopathy already go to some length to alert us to the parasitic mind-set of the most psychopathic individuals.

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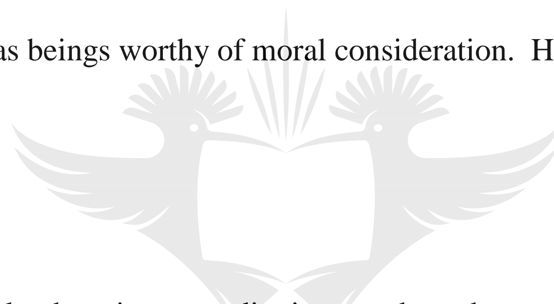
battles against the influenza virus, for example). And so it could be argued that my view does not prohibit psychopath culling, to coin a phrase.

However, the psychopath is not a mere parasite; the picture is far more complicated than that. In his book, *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: Lessons in Life from Saints, Spies and Serial Killers* (2012), Kevin Dutton claims that most psychopaths are hiding in plain sight, as it were, and often make positive contributions to society as surgeons, lawyers, bomb-disposal experts, spies, or even heads of state. And so, saying that psychopaths do not have a dignity, and cannot be said to be moral agents, need not entail exclude them as beings worthy of moral consideration. Here are three further reasons why.



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First, though they lack what gives us a dignity, psychopaths are still moral patients, because, if nothing else, they have the capacity to suffer. After all, this capacity is sufficient to justify animals as worthy of moral consideration. Psychopaths seem to have a greatly diminished capacity to suffer in terms of *psychological* trauma, though, with an apparent natural immunity to such conditions as posttraumatic stress disorder (Fallon 2013:130; Hare 1993:89). This could mean that they are not owed the full set of legal rights, privileges, and moral considerations as ordinary, mentally sound adults—particularly if they have demonstrated that they pose a serious threat to society. But I will not explore this thought further here. Note briefly that I do not intend to put the psychopath on the same level as non-human animals. For he might have more value than the latter in virtue of his capacity to approximate full moral

status, but not a dignity. Further, as I suggest below, the manner in which we treat him impacts upon our own virtue.

Second, we ought not neglect to treat psychopaths as moral patients *for our own sake*; doing anything less would denigrate our own dignity. We ought not to neglect or unjustifiably harm sentient beings capable of suffering—if for no other reason that we ought to resist desensitising ourselves to such violence, and then subsequently caring less about the cluster of values in which our humanity is situated. Doing so would be to effectively aim at diminishing our own dignity. Consider this: it is revealed to you that your good colleague Jeff from the English Department is in fact a cold-blooded individual with the capacity to kill without remorse. It would be troubling if this were sufficient to desensitise you to the inherent difficulty in harming another member of your species who is posing no *immediate* threat to you or those around you. Imagine if you went up to the English Department and "exterminated" Jeff by hitting him repeatedly in the head with a large stapler. To do so would be to treat the human shaped-individual in front of you into as a mere offensive object; to do so would be, in a sense, psychopathic. Famously, Kant offers a similar rationale for why we ought not to mistreat animals:

> If a man shoots his dog because the animal is no longer capable of service, he does not fail in his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which it is his duty to show towards mankind. If he is not to stifle his human feelings, he must practice

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> kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men. (Kant, LE, 212 (27: 459))

And, as a third reason why we ought not to go about unreflectively mistreating individuals who arguably lack a dignity, consider that doing so would be harmful to their families, colleagues, and communities. Every psychopath has a mother, a father, perhaps siblings; he has a human family, and they (hopefully) do not want to see any member of their family treated in an undignified manner—even though he might conduct himself in an undignified manner.[82]

Here is what dignity entails for anti-natalism. Of course, it entails we must not interfere with and must instead support valuers who are currently in existence. But why think it means we must bring more of them into existence, or that dignity outweighs the welfarist considerations anti-natalists think are of primary ethical importance? Roughly, dignity entails that we have *pro tanto* duties toward ensuring the continued survival of the human race (or, at least, beings capable of valuing and caring about human values). I unpack this shortly.

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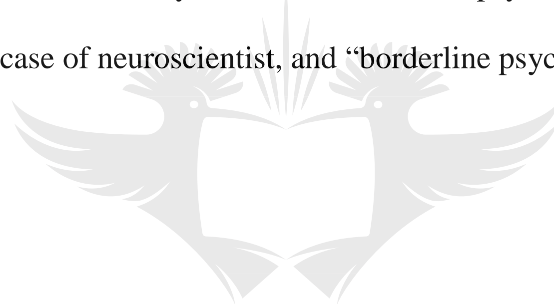
6.5. Preliminary thoughts on transhumanism and dignity

[82] Psychopathic individuals tend have no shortage of spirited defenders. For example, Cleckley (1988:29-46) documents the story of a particularly colourful psychopathic individual, Max, who manages to talk his way out of psychiatric institutions (and criminal prosecution) time and time again. Notably, despite the fact that his outrageous behaviour causes her great distress, his wife is always first to jump to his defence.

Psychopathy is thought to arise from a combination of genetic and environmental factors (Larsson et al. 2006; Fallon 2013). Psychopaths apparently have very different brain activity from ordinary people. Specifically, psychopathy is correlated with significantly reduced activity in the amygdala (Patrick 1994; Blair & Frith 2000) and the orbitofrontal cortex (Damasio 1994; LaPierre et al. 1995). The amygdala is involved in processing emotional reactions—specifically negative ones like fear and guilt, which serve to inhibit our behaviour in morally important ways. The orbitofrontal cortex is thought to be essential to learning and applying the rules of social and moral behaviour. To understand what can go wrong if these areas are not properly functioning—but are not yet down to full-blown psychopathic levels—consider the curious case of neuroscientist, and “borderline psychopath”, James Fallon.



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Sometime in 2005, Fallon was heading a study into the brains of Alzheimer’s patients. He had already by this time become a sought-after expert in the neurology of psychopaths. Fallon had piles of PET (positron emission tomography) scans of both psychopaths and non-psychopaths on his desk. Drawing a scan from the latter pile, he was surprised to see that it displayed the signature brain pattern of a psychopath (significantly reduced activity in the orbitofrontal cortex and amygdala). Fallon had used brain scans of himself and members of his own family as controls in his Alzheimer’s study, so he was concerned that someone in his family could be a psychopath. Breaking the code of anonymity, he discovered that he was looking at a scan of his own brain.

Fallon's colleagues, friends, and family were not surprised, though, when he told them what he had discovered.[83] Fallon now publicly declares himself to be a "borderline psychopath" or a "'pro-social' psychopath" (Fallon 2013:13, 253). His case gives us interesting insight into the mind of a psychopath—albeit an apparently non-violent one.

Tellingly, Fallon reveals that he would readily miss the funeral of a loved one if he learnt that there was a party on the same day (Fallon 2013:313). Fallon knows that this is considered socially unacceptable and morally inexcusable, but still doesn't care.[84] Further, despite being a grandfather who is currently still married to his high school sweetheart, Fallon admits that he's probably never experienced the emotion of love.[85] He is open about the fact that he lacks affective empathy, but that he uses his cognitive empathy to manipulate people:

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> I don't always use the information I'm given; I just get a buzz when people completely open up to me and make themselves vulnerable… [b]ut the raw motivation is to have them in my hands. People become little experiments to me. I get fun out of talking to people, *but to say I really care about them would be going too far*. (Fallon 2013:253; my emphasis)

[83] Fallon's autobiography candidly details the relationship he has with his family (they care about him; he cannot meaningfully be said to care about them): Fallon, J. 2013. *The Psychopath Inside: A Neuroscientist's Personal Journey into the Dark Side of the Brain*. New York: Penguin.

[84] Fallon also displays no remorse for potentially exposing his brother to the risk of contracting the Marburg virus. The full story can be accessed here: http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/01/life-as-a-nonviolent-psychopath/282271/

[85] Fallon reveals this at the end of an interview that can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZZSqH4uDg0

Fallon's story prompted me to think of the following analogy, one that brings together of the neuroscience of morality, as it were, along with the philosophical concept of the dignity lens. I liken the dignity lens to a kind of "software" or "default operating system" most human brains run. The ability to recognise and appropriately value instances of dignity in the world is, I would argue, an essential function of this neurological software.

Further, it appears that there is some powerful "hardware" behind this default operating system: Neural networks that serve to constrain our behaviour in dignity-respecting ways. Individuals in whom these neurological networks are poorly functioning are, on the other hand, incapable of appreciating the importance of behaving ethically. I suggest that such individuals, though they might manage to appear "normal" to us, see the world very differently; specifically, they lack the dignity lens. This can be seen as the neurological basis for being an individual with dignity.

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Crucially for those looking to defend radical human enhancement, if my hypothesis regarding the neurological basis for dignity turns out to be true, then it needn't be the case that altering humans is in some way a violation of human dignity. Nor need it be true that altered humans will lack a dignity. This is because the transhumanist project can aim at altering humans in a manner that does not damage these dignity-bestowing neural features and could in fact enhance them. As a result, transhumans, in caring about the same cluster of intrinsically valuable goods as we do, can be said to have a dignity for precisely the same reasons as (I have been arguing) *we* can be said to have

a dignity. In fact, there is the potential to augment our capacity to care about intrinsically valuable goods: to make us more appreciative and respectful of them, and less prone to the shifts in temper, for example, that can lead us to fail to respect what we ought to.[86]

Lastly, leaving aside enhancement, there is the possibility that technological interventions can assist in the treatment of conditions like psychopathy—a condition which not only appears to be resistant to existing treatment modalities, but which in fact seems to get worse because of these attempts at treatment (Hare 1993:193-200). There is some evidence that a technique known as deep brain stimulation (DBS) can assist in treating depression (Mayberg et al. 2005). DBS involves inserting electrodes deep into the brain, and there is some discussion around the possibility that it can "jump start" the poorly functioning parts of a psychopathic individual's brain (Fallon 2013; Canavero 2014; Hübner & White 2016; Mackenzie 2016). Though it raises its own moral dilemmas, gifting the psychopath with a pair of "dignity glasses"—and thereby *a dignity*—might thus be within the realm of possibility.

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[86] Elizabeth Fenton (2010), for example, argues that there are "perils" to *not* embracing human enhancement. I return to this kind of view later in my thesis when I address transhumanism in greater depth.

7. Dignity and extinction

7.1. Overview

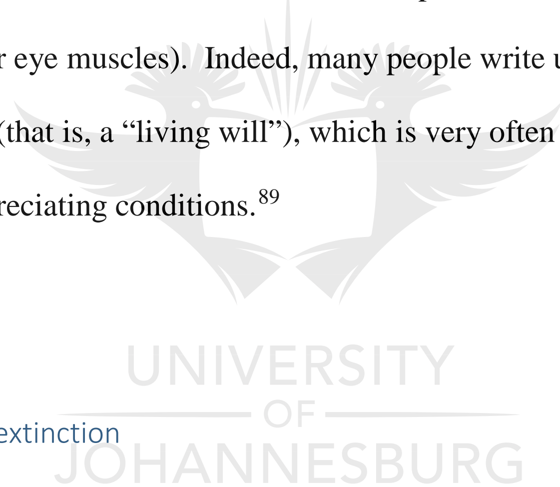
My overall aim in this chapter is to continue to argue that, taken to its logical extreme, anti-natalism would violate our duty to respect human dignity, and that anti-natalism therefore offers no real solution to the problem of human suffering—a problem it ostensibly aims to directly address. To put more precisely, I argue that we unavoidably judge ourselves to have a dignity, and that this therefore means that we ought to continue existing as a species.

Imagine a possible future where we do in fact aim at a phased extinction, one where we all work toward ending the existence of the human species as painlessly as possible.[87] Ought we to aim at this sort of end? Is this the best possible solution to the problem of human suffering? What sort of moral considerations would weigh against this kind of decision? Recall that I have claimed that the revised concept of dignity gives us *pro tanto* reasons to think a voluntary phased extinction is morally impermissible. In this chapter, I show why, *contra* Benatar, our extinction would indeed be a bad thing. I then demonstrate how dignity helps us understand our duties toward both the world and ourselves, and how these duties demand that we avoid our extinction.[88]

[87] Benatar (2006:182-193) discusses the merits of a phased extinction, concluding that "the creation of new generations could only possibly be acceptable [in his view] if it were aimed at phasing out people" (2006:184).

[88] I am aware of my focus on "we" as the subject, and that it is also worth discussing the duties of individuals. As I discuss in the main text, it is difficult to defend ordinary, everyday, individual acts of procreation—even in light of my claims regarding dignity. But there may be a way to defend selected procreative decisions, insofar as they aim toward a collective human project of preventing extinction and the radical minimisation of the amount of harm in the human condition.

I should, again, remind the reader that I do not think that considerations of dignity alone can get us to a defence of procreation; the other components of my overall argument—meaningfulness and radical pain reduction via transhumanism—are also of great importance. And so, it might very well be the case that the harms of life are so insurmountably bad, that it would be unreasonable to think that considerations of dignity (or meaning in life) alone could get us to a natal-friendly conclusion. But I should emphasise that human beings are willing to withstand quite a bit of welfarist bad for the sake of respecting dignity. For example, many people would rather choose death over dignity-impairing states such as locked-in syndrome—a condition in which cognitive functions are unaffected, but all a patient's voluntary muscles are paralysed (except for eye muscles). Indeed, many people write up an advance healthcare directive (that is, a "living will"), which is very often motivated by a desire to avoid dignity-depreciating conditions.[89]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7.2. The badness of extinction

It is important to understand that the sort of anti-natalism Benatar promotes is unambiguously pro-extinction (even if not pro-mortalist). Most people in the modern world are anti-natalists to some limited degree. Most people, though they want to have children, do not want to have *as many as possible*. Further, most couples do not

[89] Perhaps it might be objected that this example calls my dignity-as-caring account into question, as the example seems to appeal to accounts of dignity that would associate the concept with autonomy. But, ideally, a person directs her will toward designing a life around the things she cares most about, and it is in this sense that her autonomy gains its moral significance for her. One of the things people care most about is upholding certain personal standards. A person with a condition like locked-in syndrome is completely dependent on others for even the most basic aspects of self-care. To many people, even the ultimate harm of death is preferable to the indignities they might be forced to endure if they were unable to care for themselves.

aim at having children *whenever they have sex.* Lastly, most people agree that there are times when it would be morally wrong to procreate, for the sake of the potential child.

But the sort of anti-natalism as defended by philosophers like Benatar is a moral prescription aimed at all human beings at all times. This thoroughgoing anti-natalism says that it is (almost) always wrong to procreate, and further, that we ideally ought to, as a collective, *aim* at our extinction. This is the best way to understand the conclusion that the best possible future scenario would be one where there is no (human) suffering. But most people would consider human extinction to be a bad thing. An anti-natalist could respond to the intuition that human extinction would be bad either by arguing that this intuition is in error, or by denying that the promotion of anti-natalism would in fact eventually lead to extinction. First, I briefly consider the latter move, before moving on to the former, which, I argue, is untenable in light of my claims regarding dignity.

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Suppose an anti-natalist, concerned about the badness of human extinction, tries to defend his anti-natal views in the following manner. He might reassert that we ought not to procreate, but that we needn't be concerned about the prospect of extinction, as most people would probably ignore claims about the moral impermissibility of procreation, and therefore create children anyway. There is thus no real danger of extinction. In other words, the anti-natalist might say that, notwithstanding how most people would respond, the most morally conscious among us can and ought to be *conscientious objectors* to procreation.

Though I am of the view that at least some of us, for various reasons, ought to be conscientious objectors to procreation,[90] I do not think that this move works for the bona fide anti-natalist aiming to defend his position against the badness of extinction. Consider the phenomenon of conscientious objection in wartime. It is morally permissible for some people in one's country to object to assisting in the war efforts.[91] But if too many of one's countrymen and women are conscientious objectors, the (presumably just) war is lost. In other words, after a certain threshold has been reached, conscientious objection becomes harder to defend due to the consequences of inaction.[92]

My point here is that instead of relying on some version of the conscientious objector argument, the anti-natalist ought to bite the bullet, as it were, and advocate voluntary human extinction. To do otherwise would be to suggest that the badness of extinction outweighs the goodness of completely eradicating human suffering. But what if the anti-natalist denies that there would be any badness to human extinction, or at least any net harm? Benatar takes this route.

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[90] Some of these reasons are: concerns about overpopulation, financial considerations, serious and warranted doubts over one's (or one's partner's) suitability for parenthood, and concerns relating to unacceptable risk of one's offspring inheriting terrible congenital conditions.

[91] Of course, one can object to taking arms, but still assist in wartime efforts in some other fashion. The point, though, is that after reaching a certain threshold, not having enough people who are willing to engage in fighting will lead to certain defeat. I should also note at this point that making analogies suitable to modern warfare is tricky. Instead of objecting to being "a soldier on the battlefield", one might object to being "a drone pilot in a control room." Additionally, there are all sorts of moral dilemmas created by the advent of autonomous killing machines. Modern warfare is far removed from the days of thrusting a sword into the heart of one's enemy.

[92] Perhaps the anti-natalist might try to argue that extinction seems bad only or mainly because it is associated with pro-mortalism. But my discussion on the importance of meaning in life in the next part of this thesis illustrates why matters are more complicated than this.

Benatar (2006:183-184) acknowledges the likelihood that a voluntary extinction attempt would (eventually) lead to great suffering for some. This is because if we adopt a staggered approach toward human extinction, after a certain population threshold has been reached, the quality of life might begin to drop quite drastically. Indeed, the last humans might lead terrible lives. This might be unavoidable, but deciding on ending the human race in one generation might lead to even more suffering. Notably, this fact leads Benatar to concede that "the creation of new generations could only possibly be acceptable […] if it were aimed at phasing out people" (2006:184).

Crucially, however, Benatar (2006:15) does not think that human extinction in itself would be bad. Consider what he says in the following passage in the context of regretting a future with no human life:

> [W]hat is so special about a world that contains moral agents and rational deliberators? That humans value a world that contains beings such as themselves says more about their inappropriate sense of self-importance than it does about the world […] Although humans may value moral agency and rational deliberation,[93] it is far from clear that these features of our world have value *sub specie aeternitatis*. (Benatar 2006:199)

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[93] I have suggested that instead of placing emphasis on our moral and rational nature, we can instead emphasise the fact that we have the capacity to value in the first place (let alone the capacity to care about value). To my mind, by adding this affective dimension, we can see that the contribution human existence makes to the world far richer than Benatar's more limited appraisal. I say more about this in the main text.

At this point, I hope that I have done enough to show why we ought to accept dignity as a condition for the possibility of moral agency, and as the best explanation of a variety of intuitions. I now wish to show why we should expand our judgement to also accept the following claim: It would bad if the world contained no human persons—that is, no beings with a dignity.

For one, such a world would be devoid of a very special value. Specifically, such a world would be devoid of beings that could value the world—and this represents a loss of value to the world. Consider the fact that we think it bad that (other) species have gone extinct—for example, the Quagga, and the West African Black Rhinoceros. We do not think their extinction is bad for members of those species themselves (because they are not around to mourn their extinction); rather, it is bad because their extinction is, as we perceive it, a loss of superlative value to the world. And if it is bad for non-human species to go extinct, then it is bad, *a fortiori*, for human beings to go extinct.[94] Further, if it is wrong for us to intentionally cause the extinction of non-human species, then it is wrong, *a fortiori*, for us to intentionally bring about our own extinction.

It might be argued that this is too quick, that I might be missing some morally relevant distinction between natural and man-made extinctions. There is indeed a morally relevant distinction here, but it in fact supports my argument. This is because

[94] Benatar might argue that if the species that went extinct was not capable of living a better or worse life, then there is an important difference between their extinction and ours. I can concede this, but it prompts the question: What are *we* to make of the fact that we are capable of living a better or worse life? I would argue that the fact that we are capable of living a better life—through advances in science, medicine, engineering, etc., and, perhaps, some version of transhumanism—that we ought to stick around. Our extinction would thus be a *greater* tragedy than those of other species, because, for us, things could have been (and ought to have been?) otherwise.

we tend to feel worse about man-made extinctions, and a voluntary human extinction project would, by definition, be a man-made extinction.

Or perhaps one might object that I am making too much of the claim that we care about the extinction of (other) species. For example, it might be argued that we care only in trivial ways about the extinction of, say, the dinosaurs. But I am not sure that this is true. Many people have devoted their lives to collecting dinosaur fossils, painstakingly documenting their findings, and working through the most plausible hypotheses for how these long-extinct creatures lived (and eventually died out). Also, academics aside, consider how *Jurassic Park* (1993) and its spin-offs have captured the imaginations (and wallets) of the general public. And similar things could be said about our fascination with other extinct species—and, indeed, the phenomenon of extinction itself—and our proposed efforts to "de-exinctify" certain species, such as woolly mammoths.[95]

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Another objection might appeal to the fact that we sometimes think it justified to cause the extinction of certain species. But *these* species tend to be parasitic upon what we value—think, for example, of viruses like influenza or HIV, or the bacteria that cause bubonic plague—and the human species ought not to be viewed in this light. There may indeed be some sense in which humans can be said to be parasitic upon the natural world, but this aspect to our existence greatly troubles us. It troubles us to such an extent, in fact, that some people think we ought to phase ourselves out of existence as a result of the harm we cause to other species! Gerald Harrison and Julia Tanner seem to be relying on such intuitions when they argue, in a paper in

[95] See: https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/feb/16/woolly-mammoth-resurrection-scientists

promoting anti-natalism, that our extinction would be good for other species and the environment, due to the harmful effects of human activity (2011:115-116).

It might be objected, however, that the line of argumentation I am pursuing here relies upon the contentious view that parts of the world itself have intrinsic value—that is, value apart from our human perception and interests. But I need not (yet) appeal to this view (common among deep ecologists) to defend the notion that there is an inherent badness to our extinction. Consider instead the following thought experiment. Think of our search for life on other planets, and what the discovery of even non-sentient alien lifeforms would mean to us. Were we to find a planet other than earth with, say, even unicellular lifeforms, we would come to view that planet as having a superlative value incomparable to the lifeless worlds surrounding it. Even mere life, to us, has an intrinsic value.

However, as I understand his position, Benatar (2006:81) might argue that we would be in error here, as we would be viewing things *sub specie humanitatis*—that is, from a human perspective. He may argue, that there is no reason to believe that a(nother) world containing life has value *sub specie aeternitatis*—that is, from a truly objective perspective.

But what if we were to suggest a way to view ourselves and our values from an external perspective?[96] Imagine if we were to discover a planet of beings with the capacity to care about roughly the same cluster of values as we do—extra-terrestrial

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[96] There is also the option of simply rejecting the point of view of eternity. As I discuss in the second part of my thesis on meaning in life, Metz (2009; 2013) takes this route.

beings, that is, with a dignity. Consider the fact that they have also discovered *us*. Their gaze affirms our superlative value. They arguably cannot be said on their own to have the ability to look at us, or the universe, from a *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective, but their perspective is nonetheless an external (to ours) and morally relevant one. Further, if we were to decide upon a phased extinction of human life on earth, our extinction, viewed through the dignity lenses of our distant neighbours, would be perceived as inherently bad.[97]

Of course, it is also possible that these extra-terrestrial beings will come to look upon as vermin, but if they do in fact have the capacity to care about the same cluster of values as we do, I am of the view that it would be possible to change their minds. Though we often behave parasitically (think here of our ignoble track record of precipitating the extinction of other species), we are, at our most exalted, beings who care deeply about intrinsically valuable goods.

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This is to say that, despite the fact that we can commit acts of great evil, appreciating intrinsically valuable goods is in fact the quintessential expression of what it means to be human.[98] Further, devoting a large part of our energies toward the preservation and cultivation of these goods is the ultimate expression of humanness. In other words, we are, at our best, not parasitic beings, but symbiotic; my suggestion is that extra-terrestrial beings who care about a similar cluster of ("human") values would hopefully in turn be able to recognise *our* intrinsic value.[99]

[97] Though perhaps not bad, *all things considered*.
[98] Our extra-terrestrial friends could plausibly accuse me of speciesism here! For they could point out that they too are imbued with the positive attributes I am claiming are "human".
[99] On my view, such beings could also be said to have a dignity.

In saying that human beings are "arrogant" to think that we have a special place in the universe, Benatar appeals to values and intuitions that are not universal (no pun intended).[100] The (cosmic scale) *communal* value system I sketched above, on the other hand, might give us a very different picture. When we imagine having but one perspective in a *community* of valuers such as this, it becomes harder to justify an insistence on a *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective.[101] And a communal perspective is not entirely far-fetched, because our dignity-lensed extra-terrestrial friends in the above thought experiment quite possibly do exist. Astronomers consider it vanishingly implausible that earth is the only planet in the galaxy—let alone the universe—to have evolved intelligent life. In fact, a recent study (Frank & Sullivan 2016) estimates that there is a one in 60 billion chance that ours is the only intelligent species in the galaxy. And so, it is likely that our continued presence in the world could be valued from beyond the perspective of humanity, and that our extinction will (eventually) be regretted.

7.3. Duties toward the world, duties toward ourselves

Thus far, I have been engaging in an axiological examination of extinction: that is, I have been looking at the perceived badness of extinction, and have argued that there is indeed some morally significant badness here. I now turn directly toward a deontic treatment of the ethical issue surrounding extinction, and ask whether it is morally

[100] Specifically, he says: "[…] the concern that humans will not exist at some future time is either a symptom of the human arrogance that our presence makes the world a better place or is some misplaced sentimentalism" (Benatar 2006:200).
[101] Also note that in order to offer his view of what is *not* part of that perspective, he must know what *is* part of it.

permissible for us to aim at extinction. I offer two arguments for why voluntary extinction is not morally permissible. First, it is morally impermissible because it violates our *pro tanto* duties toward the world. Second, it amounts to a violation of our *pro tanto* duties toward ourselves.

In terms of our *pro tanto* duties toward the world, removing ourselves from existence would not be an act that we performed independent of the world; rather, we would be acting upon the world—and acting upon it in a destructive way. For we are part of the world; removing ourselves from the world would remove great value from it.[102] To be clear, the question I am posing here is this: Is it morally permissible to take it upon ourselves to irrevocably remove intrinsic value from the world?

Richard Routley (later Richard Sylvan) famously argues that it would be morally impermissible for the last man on earth to destroy the world's remaining species (Routley 1973). Importantly, the wrongness of the last man's world-destroying actions in this scenario cannot be explained by appealing to the instrumental value the world has to other human valuers (because there are no other human valuers). If the last man's actions are morally wrong, so the argument goes, they are wrong because they fail to give due respect to the intrinsic value of nature.

With my claims regarding dignity in mind, I am of the view that if it would be morally wrong for the last man on earth to wilfully destroy as many non-human lifeforms as he can, then it would be wrong, *a fortiori*, for people to intentionally

[102] An anti-natalist might respond by saying that by not procreating, one is not *removing* value; one is simply failing to add it. As I discuss later in the main text, I think there is element of speciousness to this sort of reasoning.

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make themselves the last generation of human beings. Crucially, this goes further than merely appealing to a duty to respect the dignity of individual human beings; it appeals, also, to an intuition about the value of species as wholes (or at least distinct from the well-being of their individual members) that is commonly held, particularly amongst professional ethicists. And it tells against anti-natalism.

Another reason to doubt the view that a voluntary extinction would be morally permissible is that it goes deeply against our moral nature. My intuition is that we have duties toward the world that forbid us from unjustly destroying intrinsically valuable goods.[103] Accepting this duty forbids us from knowingly seeking solutions to human suffering that will lead to our extinction. Whilst we might currently be responsible for causing great harm—to members of our own species, other species, and to the planet—we can and ought to aim at improving the status quo. Recall that we are beings that are able to detect, appraise, and care about value, and also mourn the loss of intrinsically valuable goods. What is more, at our best, we aim at minimising the loss of such goods.

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There is one last and important criticism that I should address. It might be argued that my understanding of dignity—which associates an individual's dignity with his or her capacity to care about value—cannot help explain the badness of extinction, because, on the face of it, only individuals can have a dignity, and not species. This is an important criticism, but here, briefly, are three reasons in favour of the view that our extinction would be bad on dignitarian grounds, even on my dignity-as-caring view.

[103] Not procreating is usually described as more than an omission than a commission. As I discuss later in the main text, though, there are scenarios where *not* procreating can be characterised as commission.

First, it is coherent to speak of the eradication of all *individual* members of the species as bad on dignitarian grounds. All things being equal, if the annihilation of a dignity-bearing individual would be bad, then, *a fortiori*, the annihilation of *all* dignity-bearing individuals would be bad (worse). And further, if it would be morally wrong, all things being equal, to *aim* at ending the life of a dignity-bearing individual, then it would be morally wrong (worse), *a fortiori*, to aim at ending the lives of *all* dignity-bearing individuals. This follows even if one accepts a dignity-as-caring view (as I explain below).

Second, understanding how and why dignity inheres in the human species requires us to look at our species as more than just the sum of its parts. There are several interrelated lines of thought to consider here. Ours is a social, interconnected species, and things of superlative value emerge through our co-operative efforts.[104] What is more, these collective efforts are essential to the flourishing of individual human beings, and essential, therefore, to adequately respecting the dignity of these individuals.[105] Thus, as beings whose central feature is to care about value, we cannot entirely separate our humanness (that is, our dignity) from the flourishing of our species as a whole.

But taking this further, we also appear to care deeply about how we interact with, and impact upon, the (non-human) world—not just as individuals but also *as a species*. Consider the fact that we believe our collective efforts ought to be directed not merely

[104] For example, think here of language, shareable bodies of knowledge in given domains, or technological innovations—or indeed, civilizations. Further, it is not a morally neutral fact that, with the annihilation of humans, these goods, too, would disappear.

[105] That is to say, I need a community of like-minded carers to help me protect and foster that which I (and we) care about.

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toward living peacefully (in an intra-species sense), but also in harmony with other species and the environment. Indeed, notable reminders of our failures to respect the inherent value of nature (oil spills, human-led extinction of species, the destruction of rainforests) can lead us to feel deeply ashamed of ourselves as a species: "We can do so much better", is often the collective refrain.

In contrast, group efforts toward assisting other people (as in the aftermath of an earthquake or hurricane, etc.), other creatures (cleaning seabirds after an oil spill, or washing and comforting abandoned or lost dogs after a natural disaster), or the environment (successfully petitioning governments to take climate change more seriously) can help "restore one's faith in humanity".[106] (And note that, when viewed from a certain height, these groups of rescuers and comforters can be imagined as *groups of carers*—groups of carers *in service of humanity*, actively demonstrating their value-caring as they move through the world trying to restore dignity *with dignity*.) Thus, we seem to think of certain collective actions as more representative of what our species ought to aim at—which is to say, we think of some collective actions as more emblematic of *the dignity of humanity*, than others. And this suggests that our intuitions regarding human dignity extend beyond the level of the individual.

Lastly, it should be noted that the view that groups can have a dignity has in fact been defended by Jeremy Waldron (2008), so the idea is out there. Admittedly, Waldron's (cautious) defence of the concept of human dignity appeals to its historical dignity-as-rank formulation, according to which only persons possessing the rank of nobility

[106] At the risk of labouring the point, note that such efforts represent the *deliberate* and *coordinated* efforts of *groups* of human beings. The good that is effected by these groups would often not be possible to effect by individuals working alone.

were considered to be “dignified”, and it thus might not seem to support my understanding of dignity. However, note that he argues that there has been a "‘transvaluation’ of dignitary values” (Waldron 2008:71), such that now all people (as opposed to only nobility) possess dignity by virtue of their membership to *the human species*. And thus, for Waldron, our dignity-talk still refers to rank, but not “the rank of some humans over others… [rather,] “we may be talking about rank of humans generally in the great chain of being” (Waldron 2008:72).

I do not want to further digress from the main thread of my argument by attempting to discuss the merits of Waldron’s arguments, but I will tentatively suggest that this group- or rank-related component of his understanding of dignity is not incompatible with mine. According to my understanding, human beings have the (potential) capacity to care about value, and this separates us from the non-human components of the world of value in a manner which prompts us to unavoidably judge our fellow humans to hold a special status (to which the psychopath is seemingly blind). Human beings thus “rank” higher on the list of goods in the world of value, insofar as they possess the superlative value associated with their capacity to *care* about value.

As a way to summarise the ideas in the preceding paragraphs, I should note that many of these ideas are echoed in Anders Sandberg’s appraisal (2014) of Nick Bostrom’s calls (2002; 2013) for greater awareness around the issue of existential risk—that is to say, the risks that could lead to the extinction of the human species. It is worth quoting Sandberg at length, as the following passage also expresses ideas I take up in a later section on meaning in life:

The existential risk issue is not so much an issue about the meaning of life as it is an issue about the prevention of the loss of meaning. If humanity becomes extinct, at the very least the loss is equivalent to the loss of all living individuals and the thwarting of their individual goals. But the loss would likely be far greater: extinction means the loss of all future generations (even modest assumptions lead to an astronomical number of future lives), all the value they might have been able to create, and maybe the meaning generated by past generations as well. But it is also possible to argue that value requires a valuer. If consciousness or intelligence is lost, it might mean that value itself becomes absent from the universe. (Sandberg 2014:10)

8. Procreation and value: going beyond welfarism

8.1. Overview

I have been discussing human dignity, and the under-examined role it might be able to play in the natal debate. I have introduced a new perspective on human dignity, according to which our dignity resides in our capacity to care about a certain cluster of values. I have suggested that this new understanding of human dignity can be worked into a plausible defence of procreation, specifically by addressing the pro-extinction aspect of anti-natalism. In addition, I have shown that, in order to be logically consistent, an anti-natalist must concede that his views do endorse extinction. Further, I have argued that failing to avoid—let alone aim at—extinction would be in violation of our *pro tanto* duties toward the world, as well as toward ourselves.

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But what if one denies that we have anti-anti-natal duties[107] of the sort I argued for above? That is to say, what if one accepted that we have duties toward ourselves or the world, but denied that these duties forbid us from courting extinction, as I have argued? Or, one might argue that it could yet be the case that the anti-natalist is correct in prioritising well-being over non-welfarist and non-moral values. In this chapter, I address these challenges by arguing that voluntary human extinction is too demanding an ethical prescription, given the sort of beings we are.

[107] This is not a typo.

A primary motive of my thesis is to clarify the ethical issues surrounding procreation. As I discussed above, no pro-natalist would be reasonable to think that procreation is always morally permissible. And, on the anti-natal side, even Benatar thinks procreation is justified under certain circumstances (or, more accurately, in one scenario, namely during a phased extinction). There are also difficult and under-explored questions regarding whether any intuited moral wrongness to voluntary extinction can be explained away by charactering such a route to extinction as omission and not commission; and whether species—and not just individual members of these species themselves—can be said to have a dignity worth respecting.

My argument here might be read as appealing to the "can" part of the "ought implies can" principle: Asking us to aim at the extinction of our own species is too demanding an ethical prescription, and it is therefore unreasonable to assert that we ought to do so. Likewise, it is also unreasonable to assert that we ought to do nothing if, for example, we are made aware of our impending, yet avoidable, extinction. Crucially, we cannot be expected to act (or fail to act) in these scenarios because of our unique orientation to value (which is what, I have been arguing, gives us a dignity).

In laying out these arguments, I attempt to clarify some of the murkiness around the issue of procreation by illustrating how, even on the most charitable interpretation of anti-natalism, our procreative duties can appear to alter under different scenarios (two of them counterfactual)—particularly when the continued existence of our species is genuinely threatened. Crucially, this helps demonstrate that the question of what we can do, and (thus) what we ought to do, does not always favour a thoroughgoing anti-natalism.

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The important link to bear in mind here is the one I have drawn between dignity and our possible extinction. I have argued that we are creatures whose defining feature is our capacity to care about value. Our moral reasoning solutions ought to respect this essential component of our humanity; indeed, I have argued that it is what gives us a dignity. In advocating extinction, anti-natalism plausibly fails to respect our dignity, as it asks us to do what for us is an anathema—namely annihilate, in a very real sense, value itself. In this next section, I argue that respecting dignity in the natal debate means that we are morally required to choose the lesser of two evils: We are, in other words, morally required to choose continued existence over extinction.

8.2. Procreative duties: three scenarios

I suspect that in order for anti-natalists and pro-natalists alike to have greater clarity on the morality of procreation, this issue should be viewed in context of how beings such as ourselves—beings with a "dignity lens"—might respond to serious existential threat to our species. Though I think all (non-psychopathic) human beings have such a value-laden perspective on the world, I limit my discussion to those brought up in the Western philosophical tradition. This is because those brought up in other traditions—for example, the African, Confucian, or Jewish traditions—do tend to think that there is some duty to procreate, which brings up cultural issues I do not have the space to adequately address.

I introduce, below, three scenarios intended to illustrate how our perceptions toward our (that is, those brought up in the Western intellectual tradition) procreative duties—and thus what we can and ought to do—might alter when under different

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levels of existential threat. I have in mind everyday procreation within our current status quo (where we usually do not feel a moral duty to procreate), a counterfactual post-apocalyptic scenario (where we might arguably feel a moral duty to procreate in order to prevent the extinction of our species), and another counterfactual scenario in which we have voluntarily decided to go extinct (and where we might feel a duty to procreate, but only out of a desire to make the lives of the last few generations less terrible). I discuss these in turn below.

8.2.1. Scenario one: the present day (everyday, business-as-usual procreative ethics)

How might a pro- or anti-natalist view our procreative duties in light of the *present* risk of human extinction? My focus is entirely on the developed world, where there is currently no great social pressure to have children, let alone a perceived duty to procreate—unlike, for example, in sub-Saharan moral thought (Metz 2010:52).[108] Indeed, it has become very common for couples to openly confess that they intend to remain childless. What is more, it would seem strange, given mainstream Western moral philosophies, to chastise them for not fulfilling any putative moral duty to procreate. For example, couples deciding against procreation could not be accused of not caring about the extinction of the human race, and asking them to have children in order to, say, preserve bloodlines would most probably be met with bemused reactions.

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[108] A recent argument against the pro-natalism prevalent in many parts of the African continent is advanced in Munalula (2012). Munalula argues that the right to procreation ought to be balanced against the expected well-being of potential child. This argument has a very Benatarian bent, given its similar focus on welfarist considerations—specifically from the potential child's perspective.

Furthermore, as there is no immediate existential threat to our species that could be allayed via increased procreation, there is arguably therefore no *prima facie* duty to procreate to prevent human extinction. On the contrary. Benatarian anti-natalism aside, it is becoming increasingly common to encounter some version of the anti-natalist argument proceeding from environmental concerns regarding human overpopulation and other human activities.[109] What is more, many people are choosing to forgo procreation in favour of adopting, and, further, many of these people believe that we are in fact morally required to choose adoption over procreation.[110]

It might be very difficult for many couples to voluntarily forgo procreating (in favour of, say, adopting)—but, with reference to the principle of "ought implies can", "hard to do" and "cannot do" are two quite different things. It is therefore not unreasonable for an anti-natalist to expect at least some current existers to choose to remain childless for ethical reasons. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable for the anti-natalist to say that couples *can* do this, as there are currently no countervailing moral considerations weighing heavily on their conscience—considerations stemming from either our possible extinction due to dwindling population size (that is, non-welfarist moral considerations), or from welfarist considerations relating to there being too few human beings to make the lives of current existers worth living.

To be sure, though many couples come to hold an anti-natal perspective, it may nevertheless be a difficult decision—given, of course, the strong biological urge to

[109] For very recent discussions of these issues in popular media, see Wallace-Wells (2017) and Weinberg (2017).
[110] For a thesis-length defence of this view, see Coetser (2014).

have children. And, what is more, for many couples who are not anti-natalists, but who cannot bear children, remaining childless against their wishes is very often a heart-breaking state of affairs. But though would-be parents might experience their voluntary or involuntary childlessness as agonisingly painful, it is not a heart-wrenching moral decision for the sorts of reasons outlined in Scenario Two, below.

To conclude, there is currently no risk of human extinction (at least not by virtue of there being too few humans), because, in part, there are plenty of people willing to procreate (this creates its own moral dilemma, which I discuss shortly). There is no *prima facie* duty to procreate from any putative duty to prevent human extinction. Thus, on the face of it, there is no objection to the anti-natalist's claim that would-be parents ought not to procreate—at least, not one that I can think of stemming from any *prima facie* duty to avoid extinction. This is because anti-natalism is true (I am continuing to assume), and would-be parents *can* choose not to create children (that is, it is within the realm of possibility for at least some current existers to choose not to procreate).

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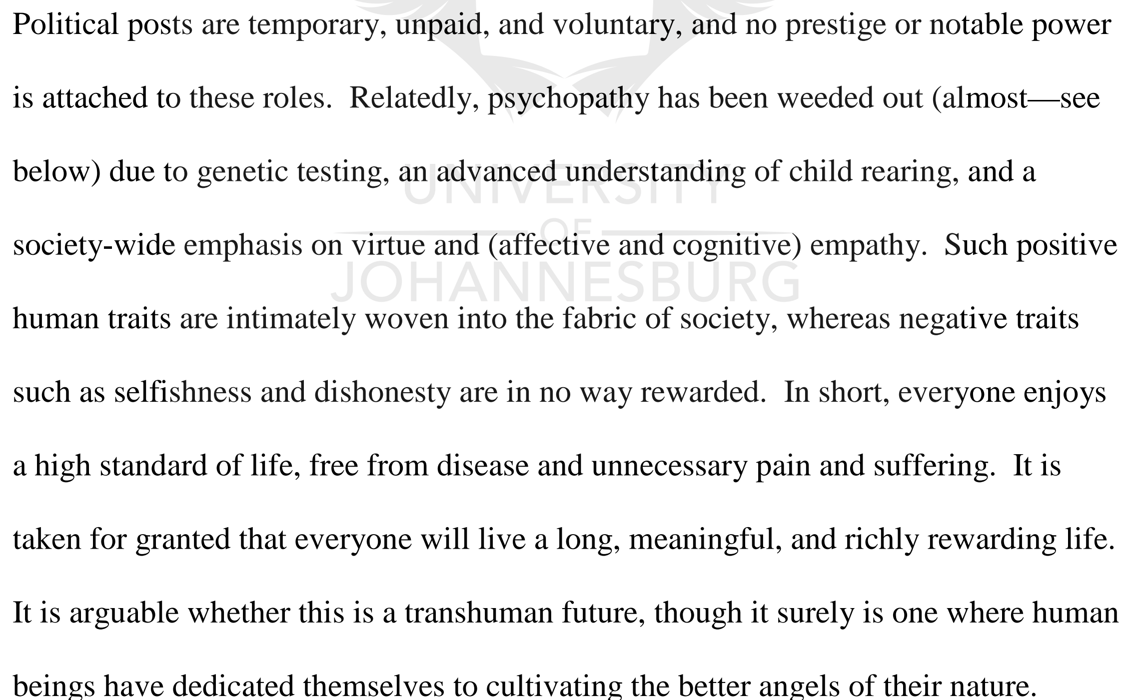
8.2.2. Scenario two: post-apocalyptic procreative ethics

Imagine a scenario where it is *not* easy to opt out of having children, and where deciding to remain childless is arguably *not* morally neutral. Picture the following. It is sometime in the future. Human beings have gained such a fine command over technology that most jobs deemed to be undignified are now undertaken by machines. Sweatshops and other exploitative labour practices are a thing of the past. We have broken free from our reliance of fossil fuels, and no longer desire the taste of animal

flesh. We use reason to temper our passions and appetites, and we live in harmony with each other and the natural world.

Society has developed an intricate and sophisticated understanding of human psychology and what it means to be human. Though some people still experience the occasional episode of uncomfortable sadness or self-doubt, institutions and cultural practices are deeply honed toward human flourishing in a way that renders it almost impossible for anyone to fall into clinical depression, suffer from an anxiety disorder, or experience any lingering ennui. There is no need for a “happy pill”, as one would have to be irrationally ungrateful or severely deluded to experience persistent unhappiness in such a society.



Political posts are temporary, unpaid, and voluntary, and no prestige or notable power is attached to these roles. Relatedly, psychopathy has been weeded out (almost—see below) due to genetic testing, an advanced understanding of child rearing, and a society-wide emphasis on virtue and (affective and cognitive) empathy. Such positive human traits are intimately woven into the fabric of society, whereas negative traits such as selfishness and dishonesty are in no way rewarded. In short, everyone enjoys a high standard of life, free from disease and unnecessary pain and suffering. It is taken for granted that everyone will live a long, meaningful, and richly rewarding life. It is arguable whether this is a transhuman future, though it surely is one where human beings have dedicated themselves to cultivating the better angels of their nature.

Unfortunately, a devastating catastrophe occurs. The world’s last individual on the psychopathic spectrum, an emeritus professor of computer science, has grown

evermore cocky from evading detection. Out of pure boredom, he sends a faulty set of instructions to the nanochips standardly implanted in every human brain (assume that these chips are were never intended to serve nefarious ends). Unexpectedly, this causes the painless and instantaneous death of every human being on earth.

But these are not the last human beings in existence. The very next day, a group of people return via spaceship from the fully automated honeymoon retreat on Mars.[111] They are, of course, devastated by what they discover, but stoically resolve to do what needs to be done to clean up, as it were. Thankfully, the worldwide technological infrastructure is intact, and relatively simple for even the untrained to navigate—but it will eventually require more people on earth in order for the necessary maintenance to be done. With the help of this infrastructure—which also briefs them on exactly how the catastrophe occurred—all the necessary funeral rituals are completed without much delay. Monuments are built in honour of the fallen.

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With the help of their advanced technology, these last remaining humans discover a very important fact: *A critical population threshold has been reached*. Human beings are now a critically endangered species. They will have to act, and act fast: If they do not procreate, the human race might never recover. They need to procreate, in other words, to avoid human extinction. Ought they to do this?

To be clear, these (potentially) last humans can live out their final days in comfort. Benatar (2006:182-184) points out that aiming at extinction might impermissibly lead to a decreased quality of life for the last remaining humans. The present thought

[111] The practice of honeymooning on Mars is affectionately known as "Musking".

experiment is intended to address this quality of life concern. As they live in a slowly crumbling but still largely automated world, our last humans need not procreate in order to ensure a decent quality of life. With minimal maintenance, the automated technological infrastructure of their world will perhaps only start to collapse a couple hundred years into the future. Until then, robots will take care of the world's remaining (neutered and spayed?) companion animals. Assume, also, that this crumbling infrastructure will not harm the natural world.

But imagine the artificial intelligence has done the math in terms of how many children need to be created over the next few generations to ensure that human beings are no longer an endangered species. Assume that there is sufficient genetic diversity amongst the world's remaining humans to ensure that children are born without congenital defects.[112] Recall that these are loving couples. They are all currently childless, as, for legal reasons, sex with the aim of procreating is not permitted on Mars or on the interplanetary spaceship. Assume that prophylactic measures are so advanced—perhaps there is a male "pill"—that so-called "accidental pregnancies" are inconceivable (no pun intended).

The last humans do not need to procreate in order to maintain a decent quality of life for themselves. They do not, in other words, need to procreate out of welfarist considerations (relating to their own welfare). However, can a case be made for them to procreate from a duty to preserve the human race? Shortly, I show how such a case can indeed be put forward.

[112] Although there is some evidence that fears of congenital defects stemming from first cousin unions is without genuine biological basis (Bennett et al. 2002).

8.2.3. Scenario three: procreative ethics during a phased extinction

Benatar argues that it would be best for the human race to collectively work toward its own extinction—though he does not think it will ever happen (2006:184).[113] As I have been arguing, this perspective neglects other, non-welfarist values, and thus might only offer us an incomplete picture of what we ought to do regarding the problem of human suffering. However, I first turn to a brief examination of what our procreative duties might look like in a scenario where we have (at least ostensibly) decided to take Benatar's advice, and have actually aimed at a phased extinction. How ought such a voluntary human extinction project play out?

The first thing to note is that, presumably, it would be ideal if we aimed at the sort of situation the last humans find themselves in in Scenario Two. That is to say, we ought to ensure that, once the critical population threshold is reached (the point of no return for humanity), the last humans ought to nevertheless live sufficiently decent lives from a welfarist perspective. Of course, though, we cannot rely on the fictional technology I described in Scenario Two. This technology, recall, ensures that the (potentially) last humans can live out their last days—and, perhaps, the last days of their species—with a good degree of comfort. But, outside of science fiction scenarios, we cannot reasonably expect that this is how the last humans in a phased extinction would live out their lives.

The last generation of humans would likely suffer terribly. Plausibly, their lives would not be worth living. Resources would be scarce. The technological

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[113] Neither does the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), for that matter—though this does not stop its members from advocating such an outcome. More information about VHEMT can be found at http://www.vhemt.org/aboutvhemt.htm.

infrastructure that makes our lives easier in so many wonderful and underappreciated ways would be long gone, unsustainable due to having no labour (let alone *skilled* labour) left to spare. Those without the skills to live off the land would perish. Further, it is difficult to imagine humanity getting to its last generation having completely avoided entering into a kind of Hobbesian state of nature with no semblance of respect for the rule of law (presumably, there would be no courts, and no real authority to uphold the law).

And all of this is purely from a welfarist perspective; it says nothing about the weight of meaninglessness under which the last humans might find themselves suffocating. It says nothing about the agonising lack of self-worth (a poverty of value) they might feel when they realise that they were mere means to an end—brought into existence perhaps only to ease the suffering of the generation before them. Ultimately, we simply cannot know what it would be like, existentially, for beings such as ourselves to see through the largest self-inflicted genocide in history—something many of us might experience as the genocide of value itself.

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8.3. What we *can* do

The "ought implies can" principle is generally taken to have originated with Kant. For example, in *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says: "The action to which the '*ought*' applies must indeed be possible under natural conditions" (A548/B576; Kant's emphasis). The principle is broadly accepted by philosophers, though some reject it (for example, Kekes 1984, and Kramer 2004). Suffice it to say, I accept the truth of "ought implies can", and take it to mean that moral agents cannot be obligated to

choose acts that are impossible for them to perform. However, I am cautious of claiming that it would be literally impossible for us as human beings to follow through with our own extinction. Therefore, I aim only to defend a weaker view, namely one that considers anti-natalism to be too demanding an ethical prescription, while retaining the "ought implies can" principle as a kind of stylistic device. The question I seek to answer in the following paragraphs can thus be spelt out like this: *Can we say that people ought* never *to have children if this supposedly "moral" command has no real world prescriptive force (due to being too ethically demanding)?* I argue that the most plausible answer to this question is "no", but the three scenarios described above offer provisos.

With Scenario One in mind, when considering procreation from a strictly welfarist perspective, opting out of having children generally bears no moral wrongness. There is no immediate, ever-present danger of the human race going extinct. Could it be argued that considerations of dignity can provide a reason to *create* a being that has a dignity? Is there is any reason to think that these considerations apply only at the species level? My intuitions regarding this lead me strongly away from an endorsement of procreation in this scenario (and toward an endorsement of adoption), but it would be interesting to explore this further (in another project, though, for this thesis takes a different route).

In this thesis, dignity does the work of motivating a general prescription against extinction. It is this consideration, in conjunction with considerations of meaning as well as the promise of a human future containing radically less pain and suffering, that firmly challenges the anti-natalist. And so, to summarise the moral lesson of

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Scenario One: people can be anti-natalists, and, without the threat of human extinction, perhaps they ought to be.

But Scenario Two introduces new moral and non-moral values; specifically, for the sake of the present discussion on respect for human dignity, it brings to the fore the fact that we care very deeply about the continued existence of our species. As a consequence of this significant kind of caring,[114] the prospect of our extinction elicits in us, at the very least, non-trivial existential angst. Further, with threat at its most severe, escaping from out the shadow of extinction becomes the fulcrum around which we design our lives.

To summarise the takeaway from Scenario Two: the people here cannot be expected to adopt anti-natalism, as it means allowing humanity to go extinct, and it would be unreasonably demanding to expect this of human beings—that is, creatures whose defining feature is arguably their capacity to care about value. Therefore, it makes no sense to say that they *ought* to be anti-natalists.

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Scenario Three briefly describes what a voluntary human extinction might look like. Along with most people, though, I think it would be improbable for us to collectively and intentionally bring about this state of affairs in the first place—let alone sustain it inter-generationally. We as human beings seem to be deeply motivated by the thought that the human project will continue long after we have played our part in it. And, further, the human project itself arguably seems to be the result of the unceasing drive to transcend of our own mortality.

[114] Might we call it "species care", itself a component of, say, "existential care"?

The above ideas are discussed in depth by Samuel Scheffler, and I go into a more thorough discussion of his views in the next part of my thesis, which deals with meaning in life. For now, suffice it to say, to suggest that a voluntary phased extinction could ever become a reality would seem to run counter to what we know about the very deepest motivations of human beings.

To summarise the moral lesson of Scenario Three: it is hard to imagine people actually coming to this arrangement; arguably, it cannot happen. Therefore, it is difficult to make sense of the claim that it ought to happen.

To conclude, it is difficult to make sense of the claim that we ought never to have children. This is because, if adopted *en masse*, a thoroughgoing anti-natalism would lead to our extinction. But we cannot bring ourselves to aim at, nor resist intervening in, our own extinction. Therefore, whilst an anti-natalist can coherently make fairweather claims about the supposed all-things-considered moral wrongness of procreation, he in fact cannot coherently claim that it holds true for all time. This is because we can imagine there being a scenario when we find it far too demanding to be anti-natalists, a time when human beings are under clear and present existential threat. And in such times, at least, it would be unreasonable to suggest that we ought not to do what we would surely believe we are compelled to do (namely, attempt to stave off humanity's extinction by procreating).

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Even if we could in fact motivate ourselves to a thoroughgoing anti-natalist position, I am doubtful if we could do it without destroying that which gives us a dignity. This is because we would have to destroy ourselves in the fullest moral sense in order to

countenance destroying ourselves in the physical sense. If preparing for the extinction of our species amounts to a violation of our duties toward ourselves as beings who care about value, then this is explicitly a scenario where welfarism and respect for human dignity go head-to-head, with welfarism losing out in a zero-sum game as *the* moral principle underwriting our final moral acts. Choosing extinction means choosing (respect for) welfarism over respect for dignity; on the other hand, choosing continued human existence need not mean abandoning welfarism in favour of dignity. But, because our moral sense is deeply troubled by the irretrievable loss of value, we are ultimately loathe to court the loss of value that occurs on a species-wide scale.

There is one final consideration to which I would like to draw attention. An anti-natalist could respond to his position's apparent pro-mortalism in the following manner. He could agree, for the sake of argument, that it would be bad if we went extinct. However, he could add that he is not advocating for us to direct our efforts toward extinction. Rather, he is merely advocating for us to cease procreative activities. Though, if followed en masse, this would have the consequence of human extinction—which may or may not be bad—this outcome would be the result of omission, and not commission. The former, omission, is generally taken to be less morally serious than the latter, commission.

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But the force of our imagined anti-natalist's appeal to the commission-omission distinction does not stand up to closer scrutiny. This is because an anti-natalist movement that would seriously threaten our continued existence as a species would have had to have become—*at some stage*, at least—a *deliberate* and *collective* effort.

To suggest otherwise is to stretch the bounds of credulity. And so, there is no route from Scenario One to Scenario Three that comprises only anti-natalism on a voluntary basis. In other words, there is no omission-only route from *where we are here* to extinction.

Further, we often go out of our way to prevent the extinction of other species. That is to say, we do not think it sufficient for us to merely refrain from killing the remaining members of an endangered species. Rather, we adopt sophisticated means to prevent *others* from killing these remaining members (think here of measures to prevent poaching). Further, we might establish breeding programs, and embark on extensive studies of migratory patterns and the like. What is more, we might spend considerable effort trying to educate local populations, would-be hunters or poachers, and the world at large on the need to change human behaviours that might lead, directly or indirectly, to the loss of the species in question. Given the powerful drives motivating such measures, it is not plausible to think we would easily "allow" the human species to go extinct. Even if we *could* hold ourselves back from staving off the extinction of our species, I submit that this would take a great deal of effort. The above means we have no less of an obligation toward preventing the extinction of the human species.

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8.4. What we *ought* to do

Many anti-natalists may be unconvinced by what I have argued above. For one, they might deny that ought implies can—at least, in terms of the weaker sense of certain moral prescriptions being too demanding. Or, they might accept that principle, but

deny that it is impossible for human beings to willingly bring about their own extinction, perhaps by arguing that any difficulties we might face here can best be explained as a kind of moral *akrasia*—that is, weakness of the (good) will. Further, they might argue that though it might be immensely difficult to aim at our own extinction, this does not mean that we ought not to (try), as our own extinction is in fact what we ought to aim at, all things considered. In this section, I argue against this latter view.

It is interesting to note that if there is currently no "duty" to procreate, this is due to the fact that one can be reasonably sure that *others* will continue to have children. Everyone—anti-natalists included—benefits from a steady birth rate. (And is it hypocritical of an anti-natalist to enjoy the benefits of continued procreation? Ought he, in order to be consistent with his own views, live in complete solitude, eschewing all goods created by other human beings, and survive entirely through foraging or subsistence farming?) And thus, this discussion of anti-natalism and respect for human dignity reveals an aporia: It appears to be morally wrong to bring new human beings into existence, but it *also* appears morally wrong to allow (or aim toward) the extinction of the human species. Resolving this impasse requires some imagination. As a start, consider the following analogy.

Many of us benefit from unjust labour practices. To put it all too briefly, the quality of life enjoyed by the average middle class individual in the industrialised world might not be possible without the unjust suffering of other human beings—not to mention other sentient animals. From a cocoa industry allegedly underwritten by child slavery (Schrage & Ewing 2005; Mistrati & Romano 2010; Ryan 2011; O'Keefe

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2016) to intolerable conditions in the cellphone and electronics factories (Chan & Ngai 2010; Ross 2013) that produce the products marketed as essential tools to making our world a friendlier and more connected place—the world economy is far from straightforwardly morally good. Indeed, it is difficult to say whether there are enough resources available for everyone to enjoy a worthwhile life, let alone the high standard of life many people in industrialised countries experience today.

And, moving beyond human well-being, the present thesis could have consisted entirely of a defence of (at least a moderate) anti-natal position from the negative environmental effects of human activity—in particular, the devastating environmental impact of our fossil fuel-based lifestyles. What does this mean, though, for anti-natalism? To my mind, the great value of anti-natalism is that it takes very seriously the problem of human suffering; but its inability to offer a conscionable solution to this problem means we need to look beyond anti-natalism.[115]

8.5. Dignity and non-Benatarian forms of anti-natalism

It has been clear how considerations of dignity tell against Benatar's rationales for anti-natalism, but how might other forms of anti-natalism fair? I now briefly test three non-Benatarian routes against arguments from dignity. Recall that dignity offers compelling motivation for a general injunction against extinction.

[115] Jumping ahead a little, my suggestion is that we look toward cutting edge trends in bioethics. With this in mind, the third part of my thesis focuses on the possibility of reducing the harms of existence via human enhancement technologies.

Seana Shiffrin

Recall that Shiffrin's rationale for anti-natalism is largely consent-based. To recap, in creating children, parents impose serious harms and burdens upon their offspring, without their consent, and (generally) without considerations of overriding moral importance (such as the removal or prevention of greater harm). And, to Shiffrin, procreating with this motivation in mind is, at best, a "morally mixed act" (1999:143). Shiffrin's rationale for anti-natalism thus makes things difficult for would-be parents who suggest that they are having children *for the sake of those children*. This is because it is not possible to deliver the "pure benefits" (Shiffrin 1999:124) of life without also imposing the serious harms and burdens of a typical life.

But how would a Shiffrin-esque anti-natalist[116] respond to the considerations of dignity, as discussed above? By my reading, Shiffrin does leave open the possibility that procreation could be justified even in cases where the removal or prevention of greater harm was not at stake. And so, would procreating to help the human race avoid extinction count as procreation "*in the service of a suitably important end*" (Shiffrin 1999:129; my emphasis)? And if so, would this trump consent requirements and considerations of welfare? I certainly do not think that this would explicitly run counter to any of her arguments, assuming that I am correct in suggesting that her "anti-natalism" can admit non-welfarist considerations.

Gerald Harrison

[116] Though her arguments lead to an anti-natal conclusion, Shiffrin is reluctant to explicitly endorse anti-natalism.

Recall that Harrison's anti-natalism appeals to an asymmetry of duties. According to Harrison, duties require victims:

> One can only have a duty to do X, if failing to do X would wrong someone. In other words if one cannot identify someone who would be wronged by one's failure to fulfil the supposed prima facie duty, then the duty does not exist. (Harrison 2012:96)

Harrison is aware that many people would deny that our duties are limited only to (human) victims in this fashion. But recall the last man example (Routley 1973). As Routley discussed it, and as I defended it, this thought experiment seemed to suggest that we have moral duties that go beyond our duties to our species (let alone "victims"). Anticipating the sort of move, Harrison offers the example of someone wantonly destroying all the vegetation on some uninhabited island somewhere (2012:97). Rather than appeal to some notion of intrinsic value to explain our intuitions regarding why it would be wrong to act in such a fashion, Harrison suggests that one would let *oneself* down by acting in this way—one would, in other words, be in violation of a duty toward oneself, and *this* best explains why it would be wrong to destroy the island's vegetation (2012:97).

Harrison recognises that this response, and other counterexamples he suggests might challenge his theory of prima facie duties, are "not knockdown replies" (2012:97), and that many people will thus not be convinced. There is *some* sense in which Harrison is right that one would be letting oneself down were one to act in this fashion. (Consider the reaction of the protagonist in the Antonio Machado poem at

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the start of the next section.) For there is some sense to the notion that we are caretakers for the planet, and that this ought to constrain our behaviour toward nature in specific ways.

Indeed, though, while I like the parsimony of Harrison's anti-natalism, his theory of *prima facie* duties appears unable to account for many of our moral intuitions. In the wanton destruction of nature case, it seems like if one felt distressed at letting oneself down by destroying something (non-human and non-sentient) outside of oneself, then this would be because one thought that one *ought to have done better to respect something of great value*. I do not know if Harrison would need to deny that this sort of (intrinsic) value exists, and that some of our duties can and ought to be oriented toward protecting this value (due to its instrumental value to us?)—but this is the problem: I am not sure what underwrites his theory of *prima facie* duties.

Thus far in this thesis, I have been arguing that the world of value is richer than many (anti-natalists) might acknowledge, and that this can and should inform our moral theories and constrain our behaviour in morally important ways. I wonder how Harrison, or a defender of his argument for anti-natalism, might respond to the crisis of value he would surely experience in a (near-)extinction scenario. Perhaps he would expand his theory of *prima facie* duties to include a duty not to let the human race go extinct. Perhaps this would be limited-time-only concession, until the world of value (at least, insofar as we encounter it) was rescued from the abyss. And perhaps then,

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Harrison's position would shift back to (what appears to be) a more thoroughgoing anti-natalism, ready for a second try at extinction.[117]

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[117] In separate arguments, Harrison (along with a colleague, Julia Tanner) does argue that our extinction would be a good thing (in terms of helping to ensure the survival of other species on the planet, at least). See: Harrison & Tanner (2011).

Part Two

Anti-Natalism and Meaning in Life

9. Meaning and future generations

The wind, one brilliant day, called
to my soul with an aroma of jasmine.

"In return for this jasmine odor,
I'd like all the odor of your roses."

"I have no roses; I have no flowers left now
in my garden…All are dead."

"Then I'll take the waters of the fountains,
and the yellow leaves and the dried-up petals."

The wind left…I wept. I said to my soul,
"What have you done with the garden entrusted to you?"

Antonio Machado (*The Wind, One Brilliant Day*)[118]

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9.1. Introduction

I have distinguished between the kind of conditional or soft anti-natalism that is now common in Western and some Asian countries (most notably Japan and South Korea), and the more thoroughgoing anti-natalism that is defended as a philosophical position by the likes of David Benatar. In terms of the former, many would-be parents

[118] Machado (1983:57).

consider their career goals or financial limitations as strong overriding (but not necessarily moral) reasons against having children, but they may not think that there is some fundamental moral wrongness to procreation itself. In terms of the latter, a defender of a thoroughgoing anti-natal position would argue, as Benatar does, that there are (almost) no morally tenable reasons for creating children.[119] Further, this position entails that we ideally ought, as a collective, to aim at our extinction.

I have argued, *contra* Benatar, that our extinction would indeed be bad, and that this badness poses a genuine challenge to anti-natalism. Further, I have argued that we have a *pro tanto* duty to avoid extinction. And though I have agreed with him, and other welfarist anti-natalists, that the problem of human suffering ought to be taken very seriously indeed, and that, dignity notwithstanding, it generally favours an anti-natal conclusion where there is no imminent threat of extinction, I have argued that a true all-things-considered assessment of the morality of procreation demands that these welfarist considerations must be weighed up against other, non-welfarist goods. In Part One, I looked at the concept of dignity. I argued there for a revised understanding of the concept, and showed how it entailed that we have strong moral reason to protect human existence from extinction.

In this second part of my thesis, I provide more reasons to doubt the tenability of a thoroughgoing anti-natalism by looking at another non-welfarist good—namely, meaning in life. Specifically, I focus on the issue of meaning and future generations. I base my defence of procreation on a critical discussion of the views of Samuel

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[119] Apart from, recall, the notable exception of procreating to ease the suffering of the last generations during a phased extinction.

Scheffler (2013). Scheffler argues that in order to experience our lives as meaningful we need the promise of future generations. I argue that if we accept the view that our lives would lack meaning if we knew that human extinction was imminent, then this weighs heavily against anti-natalism.

I do not intend for the claims I defend in this chapter to constitute a standalone defence of procreation; rather, I intend for the pro-natal argument from meaning I present here to supplement the claims I defended in Part One. Recall that in Part One I argued that respecting dignity entails that we should protect the human race from extinction. I also argued there that we cannot be expected, given the sorts of beings that we are—beings whose defining characteristic is, and whose superlative worth consists in, our capacity to care about a certain cluster of values—to follow a moral prescription that advocates bringing about our own extinction. I appeal to similar intuitions here when using meaning in life to challenge the thoroughgoing version of anti-natalism.

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To this end, I continue to demonstrate that the realm of moral action is constrained in ways the anti-natalist might not have realised. I continue to argue that certain actions or ends are off the table, as it were, by furthering my analysis of how non-welfarist considerations might limit how we respond to the problem of human suffering.

I do not aim to provide an extensive overview of theories of meaning.[120] My focus is primarily on meaning and future generations, specifically Scheffler's novel and very recent treatment of this topic—a matter apparently hitherto neglected by Western

[120] For an overview of contemporary literature on meaning in life, see Metz (2002).

philosophers.[121] Further, I do not aim to provide a defence of the view that procreation is permissible because it adds meaning to parents' lives, or because children can come to live meaningful lives, or because parents and their children can come to form meaningful bonds. My focus, that is to say, is not on meaningfulness as it relates to parents and their own children; rather, it is on how the promise of future generations, or the awareness that there will be no future generations, impacts upon meaning in life for human beings in general. Having said that, I am sympathetic to the view that a defence of procreation can be derived from the meaningful nature of the parent-child relationship, and I do briefly explore this possibility. In discussing prominent attempts to defend procreation in just this way, I motivate my scepticism regarding their success.

I proceed as follows. First, I briefly discuss the importance of meaningfulness in the present debate—in particular, its relationship to welfare (9.2.). I then turn to the view that the meaningful nature of the parent-child relationship can help motivate for the permissibility of procreation (9.3.). I follow this with a summary of Scheffler's view that the promise of future generations is necessary for us to experience our lives as meaningful (9.4.). I then respond (in 9.5.) to criticisms of Scheffler's views in the literature, and show how they might also be used to defend procreation. Further, I discuss Scheffler's position in light of anti-natalism, taking care in this discussion to show how the issue of meaning and future generations weighs against anti-natalism. This is something which, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been done in the

[121] Harry Frankfurt casually remarks that Scheffler's feat of opening a new field of philosophical inquiry is "not bad going, in a discipline to which many of the very best minds have already devoted themselves for close to three thousand years" (2013:132).

natal debate. I then bring things back to anti-natalism by responding to Benatar's discussion of meaning vis-à-vis the permissibility of procreation (9.6.).

Finally, Scheffler suggests, but does not expand upon, an interesting reason for why we care so deeply about future generations. This reason relates to the inchoate sense that there might be some final end to the human project, such that an imminent extinction event would strike us as particularly tragic if it loomed before we could intelligibly grasp and have a fair shot at this final end. I offer a way to understand this intuition (9.7.), and show how it ties in neatly with the aims of the transhumanist project, which I discuss in greater detail in Part Three.

9.2. Meaningfulness and welfare

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For millennia, philosophers have examined the question of "the good life". It is generally acknowledged that even the best of lives contain some measure of harm, and that even the most harm-filled lives may be judged, overall, to have been good lives. For instance, Lawrence Becker makes the observation that this latter judgement often cannot be made without a "whole-life frame of reference" (Becker 1992:26). By this he means that we have to take a more holistic perspective, mindful that certain aspects of a life—for example, courageous acts, significant artistic achievements, etc.—may make that life good, in spite of its low level of well-being. Similarly, Susan Wolf (1997) argues that self-interest—usually identified with a concern for one's welfare—is not as important as many philosophers have assumed. Rather, an examination of *meaningfulness*—a component of the good life that has a value which

is, she argues, distinct from welfare (self-interest)—may actually make self-interest (and thus welfare) look less important. Likewise, Shelly Kagan (1992) argues that the significance of well-being is generally overstated by moral philosophers.

Other non-welfarist views assert that certain properties definitive of human nature—such as knowledge or friendship—ought to be promoted, and that these states are good independent of whether or not they bring about happiness or pleasure. This view, known as "perfectionism", is perhaps most famously defended in Hurka (1993). Philosophers have even tried to downplay the importance of happiness. For Belliotti (2003), living a meaningful life, rather than finding happiness, is the greatest good. To be sure, finding happiness along the way whilst living a meaningful life is great, but the ultimate goal is to live meaningfully.

It is important to note that for many contemporary philosophers, "meaning in life" (and related terms, such as "meaningfulness") refers to a non-instrumental value that is conceptually distinct from rightness, happiness or welfare (Metz 2013:6). In addition, what is meaningful is distinct from what is worthwhile (Metz 2012c). For example, someone who devotes himself to hedonistic pursuits can be said to be living a worthwhile life, but not a meaningful one (Metz 2012c:443). And, on the other side of the distinction, think of a person who suffers so that others will not suffer (Metz 2012c:444). This person might be adding meaningfulness to his life, but he is not thereby making his life more worthwhile.

I should also state that I do not make appeals to a theory of meaning that relies on the existence of God or a soul. Rather, I have in mind a naturalist theory of meaning like

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the one defended in Metz (2013), according to which a meaningful existence is one that is "exemplified by the good (morality), the true (enquiry), and the beautiful (creativity)" (Metz 2013:6). And thus, for example, we can sensibly say that Nelson Mandela's life was both filled with great hardship, and also greatly meaningful, given its close association with the good (morality) due to his sacrifices to end Apartheid. Similarly, we think of the lives of Albert Einstein and Pablo Picasso to have been meaningful due to them deeply engaging with the true and the beautiful, respectively. (Mandela, Einstein, and Picasso are recurring exemplars in Metz 2013.)

It might be said that no life can be meaningful. But compare the life of a libertine to that of a political activist who loses decades of his life due to unjust imprisonment, and who eventually, in the twilight of his life, is released, and sees that the socio-political changes for which he and others had sacrificed their lives have finally started to be realised. The difference between lives here is not merely one of happiness; some lives are more meaningful than others.

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If this example, and the examples further above appealing to the lives of exemplars like Mandela (etc.) appear too lofty, consider the following less rarefied cases, which illustrate that we often act out of reasons that go beyond self-interest or morality. For instance, we might visit relatives in hospital, help friends move, or stay up all night creating Halloween costumes for our children.[122] A further consideration is that we as ordinary people really do care about meaning a lot, so much so in fact, that we often trade off happiness for meaning. Think here of someone who leaves an otherwise

[122] These examples of acting from "reasons of love" are from Wolf (2010:4). Wolf argues that a meaningful life is one in which we direct ourselves toward objects worthy of our love.

happy marriage after many years for an uncertain future as a world traveller. Or consider the financial risks, uncertainty, sacrifice in terms of friendships and romantic partnerships, and family censure a person has to face in order to secure a tenure-track position as an academic philosopher (assuming, of course, that one is motivated by the meaningfulness of the life of the mind).

I should also specify that I am most interested in philosophical accounts of meaning in life that associate meaningfulness with going beyond the limits of the self in some significant fashion. For example, philosophers have variously argued that a meaningful life is one which connects with organic unity (Nozick 1981), is directed toward objects worthy of our love (Wolf 2014), or is devoted to the undertaking of open-ended projects aimed at "supremely valuable goods", such as the pursuit of truth (Levy 2015:185).

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In my view, what is most interesting about applying meaningfulness to the natal debate is that such a strategy might offer not merely a non-welfarist route to permissible procreation, but perhaps a non-moral one as well.[123] (Recall that arguments for anti-natalism advanced by moral philosophers seem to appeal mainly to welfarist intuitions.) It may also take the debate beyond a duty-based ethical paradigm. Recall from Part One that I defended the position that we have a *pro tanto* duty to avoid extinction. The core of the present chapter is devoted to examining Scheffler's position on meaningfulness vis-à-vis extinction, which I subsequently use to demonstrate why we ought to avoid extinction—without us necessarily having to

[123] Though I will not explore the claim that meaning might *outweigh* morality (not merely inform or ground it), as this sentence might first suggest.

appeal to the notion of *pro tanto* (or even *prima facie*) duties. Overall, I defend the view that we are morally permitted not to sacrifice as much meaning in our lives as the anti-natalist asks of us. But I first look at arguments put forth by others that attempt to defend procreation by appealing to the meaningful nature of the parent-child relationship.

9.3. Meaning and the parent-child relationship

Christine Overall (2012) does not deny that procreation is morally problematic. Indeed, she argues that would-be parents, rather that those who choose to remain childless, are the ones who are morally required to justify their procreative decisions (Overall 2012:3). But she nevertheless believes that the parent-child relationship is a good place to look if we are trying to find something positive about procreation. In fact, she argues that "[in] this relationship lies the best reason for choosing to have a child" (Overall 2012:212). Rather than setting out to "produce an adult or even to create a specific kind of child", choosing to create a child

> is to set out to create a relationship, a relationship that gives a particular meaning to one's own life and to the life of the being that is created. This kind of relationship may well have certain goals, but the value of the relationship is not derived only from its having goals or even from achieving them. The relationship is valuable for its own sake. *The best reason to have a child is simply the creation of the mutually enriching, mutually enhancing love that is the parent-child relationship*. (Overall 2012:217; my emphasis)

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Independently, Rivka Weinberg (2016) has advanced a similar argument. According to her, "[t]he desire to engage in the parent-child relationship as a parent is […] a valid and morally acceptable procreative motivation" (2016:2). She believes that both parents and their offspring can understand and ("reflectively") endorse this desire to be a parent and be part of a family (Weinberg 2012:36-37). She calls this procreative desire "the parental motive" (Weinberg 2012:37), and argues that this kind of motivation ultimately underwrites an important restriction on the procreative acts we ought to deem permissible. Specifically, the decision to have a child "must be motivated by the desire and intention to raise, love, and nurture one's child once it is born" (Weinberg 2012:176).

In order for procreation to have a chance at being permissible, the above "motivation restriction" (Weinberg 2012:176) must be adhered to in conjunction with an understanding of "procreative balance", which she describes as follows:

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> Procreation is permissible when the risk you impose as a procreator on your children would not be irrational for you to accept as a condition of your own birth (assuming that you will exist), in exchange for the permission to procreate under these risk conditions. (Weinberg 2012:179).

Here, Weinberg is appealing to a version of John Rawls' (1971) "veil of ignorance" thought experiment to help us think about the permissibility of procreation in various scenarios. Specifically, Weinberg asks us to consider whether it would be "rational for us to risk being born with disadvantage *x* in exchange for the permission to procreate under condition *y*" (2016:179). And so, for example, we might ask if it

would it be rational (to use Weinberg's terminology) to delay having children from thirty-six to thirty-nine years old, if this meant that we would be doubling our risk of being born with Down syndrome (Weinberg 2016:179).[124]

I am deeply sympathetic to the views expressed by Overall and Weinberg, and am largely in agreement with them regarding the proper parental motivations as a requirement for (the possibility of) permissible procreation. Further, as they both acknowledge, far too many people have children without adequately reflecting on the morality of their procreative decisions (let alone the magnitude of those moral decisions). In contrast, with their very recent book-length contributions to the bourgeoning literature on the morality of procreation, Overall and Weinberg, offer the kind of insightful treatments this weighty subject deserves.

Unlike Benatar, though Overall and Weinberg believe that procreation carries with it significant risks, they consider procreation to be an activity that is (merely) morally *problematic*, as opposed to morally *wrong*. I, of course, have been assuming that procreation is indeed morally wrong (at least, on welfarist grounds). I should note that Weinberg is sympathetic to Benatar's "dark view" regarding the (experiential) badness of life (Weinberg 2016:120-121). However, she stops short of endorsing what she takes is his view that life is an "objectively bad" experience (Weinberg 2016:121). She points out that many people seem to be happy and optimistic, despite having to deal with bad experiences of various kinds, and thinks that the lack of an objective perspective from which we could judge the experiential quality of human

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[124] One's risk of having children afflicted with Down syndrome does in fact go up in this fashion. Here, Weinberg cites Hook (1983).

life is a problem for Benatar's claims regarding people deluding themselves about the quality of their lives (Weinberg 2016:127).

But Weinberg is cautious about leaping too quickly to an endorsement of procreation, because she is mindful of the anti-natal consequences of another argument for the limits of permissible harm advanced by Seana Shiffrin (1999). Recall from §2.3. that Shiffrin can be read as giving a consent-based rationale for anti-natalism. Indeed, Weinberg (2016:137) points out that Shiffrin does explicitly appeal to consent when the latter says, among other things, that "[o]ne way to think about [...] procreation as morally problematic is to say that procreation violates the consent rights of the child who results" (1999:137).

However, Weinberg thinks there is a straightforward route to dealing with this consent-based rationale for anti-natalism. Paternalism, she argues, is justified in the case of procreation, because children do not have consent rights (Weinberg 2016:137). Anticipating the objection that children will grow up, and that the future adult will still have to deal with the choice (to exist) that was made on her behalf, Weinberg argues that paternalistic interventions are justified "in cases of incompetence, for the duration of the state of incompetence, be that incompetence permanent or not" (Weinberg 2016:139-140).

It is undeniable that parent-child relationships can be a significant source of meaning in the lives of both parents and their children. But are Overall and Weinberg correct in believing that this fact can ultimately be utilised to construct a defence of procreation? I happen to think not; below, I say why. Note that Overall and

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Weinberg share similar intuitions regarding the meaningfulness of parent-child relationships as weighing in favour of procreative permissibility, but as Weinberg discusses this matter in greater depth, my focus below is on her exposition of this view.

I do not think that Weinberg has done enough to dismiss Benatar's concerns regarding the psychological mechanisms people seemingly use to cope with their negative experiences (and I think she has doubts regarding her responses as well!). For one, large numbers of people do experience their lives as burdens, and many of these people, tragically, feel compelled to end their lives. But I want to focus instead on her response to Shiffrin, because I think this will help show that Shiffrin's rationale to anti-natalism is no less robust than Benatar's, which will in turn assist me with outlining some of the major claims I make in this chapter. On this latter point, Shiffrin can be read as offering a suggestion for how procreation might be permissible, even though it always involves the imposition of serious harms, so the following discussion also serves as a useful primer for that later exposition.

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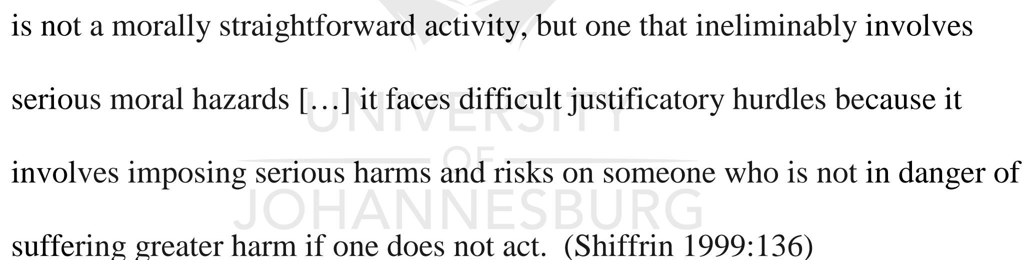
First, on the point of children not enjoying consent rights, Weinberg acknowledges the objection that children will grow up into adults (with consent rights, assuming they do not lack full moral status due to cognitive impairments, etc.), and that those adults will have to deal with their parent's procreative decisions (2016:139). Here, recall that Weinberg also thinks that paternalism is justified in cases of "incompetence", and that childhood can be viewed as a period of incompetence where parents' paternalistic stances toward their (potential) offspring are justified (2016:139-140).

The worry I have with this strategy is that does not remove moral doubts surrounding the morality of procreation, so much as move them slightly further down the road. For what reasons justify placing a child in this temporarily incompetent state *in the first place*—a state of being which *also* involves experiencing potentially serious harms? (Recall Belshaw's concerns about this stage of human life, and the fact that he uses its existence to construct an argument for anti-natalism!) For Shiffrin, any such reason would have to be "in the service of a suitably important end (such as the prevention of greater harm to them)" (1999:129). I suggest that, according to Shiffrin, everyday procreative acts, even those proceeding from sincere desires to form loving relationships with ones' offspring, may not satisfy this condition. To Shiffrin, procreation



> is not a morally straightforward activity, but one that ineliminably involves serious moral hazards […] it faces difficult justificatory hurdles because it involves imposing serious harms and risks on someone who is not in danger of suffering greater harm if one does not act. (Shiffrin 1999:136)

I should point out that Weinberg is aware (2016:138[fn25]) that she could be criticised for focussing only on the lack of consent involved in procreative decisions (which she thinks she can deal with by denying that we need the consent of children) when there are other morally relevant elements that weigh against procreation (such as the imposition of serious harms when these harms are not in aid of removing or preventing more serious harms). But she believes that *consent* is fundamental to

Shiffrin's case against the permissibility of procreation,[125] and focusses her responses to those arguments belonging to Shiffrin that seem to appeal a lack of consent. This is fair enough, but my second concern is that, on my reading of Shiffrin, the problem of not being able to obtain consent is only part of what makes procreation morally problematic.

To Shiffrin, wrongness in procreation does not arise merely because consent is neither sought nor possible; rather, it also arises because *serious* harms will be experienced *without adequate justification*. What is more, the person we create will not be able to escape from the condition we impose upon them (that is, life)—or, more accurately, it is a condition that "cannot be escaped without high costs" (that is, suicide) (Shiffrin 1999:133).

There is a *lot* of harm here—and paternalism has to do much of the justificatory work for imposing this harm on another. Paternalism and the potential for a meaningful parent-child relationship, that is. But mightn't stronger justification for the imposition of the harms of life be preferable? What if there was a way to argue that procreation may be permissible, because "something of great objective significance is at stake" (Shiffrin 1999:132)?[126] In Part One, I argued that procreation would be justified if we needed to do so to stave off the extinction of the human race. In this Part of my thesis, I fill in the sketch as to why extinction is abhorrent—so abhorrent, in fact, that

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[125] At least insofar as consent functions in an analogy employed by Shiffrin (1999:127) to illustrate certain morally problematic elements to procreation.
[126] Shiffrin uses this phrase to explain why rescuers are justified in assuming the hypothetical consent. of those whom they rescue. Rescuers must often act without the explicit consent of those whom they attempt to rescue. Further, they must often impose harm in order to save people from greater harm.

it would, to my mind, outweigh the anti-natalist's legitimate concerns regarding the moral permissibility of imposing serious harms upon unconsenting children.[127]

9.4. Samuel Scheffler on meaning and future generations

Few would disagree with Scheffler's view that the prospect of imminent human extinction would cause us "grief, sadness, and distress" (2013:21-23). His novel contribution in *Death and the Afterlife* (2013)[128] is that such a prospect would, in addition to causing us distress, significantly hinder or entirely destroy our ability to lead "value-laden lives" (Scheffler 2013:71)—by which he means "lives structured by wholehearted engagement in a full array of valued activities and interactions with others" (Scheffler 2013:71). This is to say that, under the shadow of extinction, many of the activities that we cherish and consider most meaningful—Scheffler in fact lists procreation as one such activity—would no longer seem worthwhile pursuits (Scheffler 2013:25).

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In order to illustrate the importance of future generations to how we judge the meaningfulness of our own lives, Scheffler asks us to consider a couple of extinction scenarios. In the "doomsday scenario", we learn that the human race will be annihilated by a giant asteroid thirty days after we die (Scheffler 2013:18-19). Clearly, this knowledge would greatly distress us. But why would we have this reaction, considering the fact that we will not be around to experience the destruction

[127] Or, insert (almost) any rationale for anti-natalism you prefer here.
[128] By "afterlife", Scheffler does not mean some religious notion of life after death. Rather, he means to refer to the continued existence of human beings after we ourselves have died (Scheffler 2013:15).

of humanity? This seems to suggest, says Scheffler, that what we value goes beyond what we experience (2013:30). Note that this has implications for a thoroughgoing welfarist position, implications I discuss shortly.

At this point, the anti-natalist might interject with a reminder that the end of the human race would mean the end of human suffering, something he would take as the best outcome, all things considered. Though he does not refer to anti-natalism directly, Scheffler does very briefly discuss the above negative utilitarian judgment. The end of the human species would mean the end of human suffering, which "surely" would be entered in the "plus column" (Scheffler 2013:21). However, "few of us" (die-hard negative utilitarians or [other species of] anti-natalists, perhaps?) would respond in an extinction scenario by "trying to do the sums", by attempting to calculate "whether on balance the prospect of the destruction of the earth was welcome or unwelcome" (Scheffler 2013:21). I am inclined to agree with him here, and also with his view that this reveals a "*nonconsequentialist* dimension to our attitudes about what we value and what matters to us" (Scheffler 2013:21; his emphasis).

It could be suggested that the doomsday scenario is distressing because we know our loved ones would perish—prematurely, as well—very soon after our passing. But Scheffler argues that this is not the best explanation for our negative reaction. Here, he asks us to imagine a second extinction scenario, this one borrowed from *The Children of Men* (1992), a dystopian novel by P.D. James.[129] In this "infertility

[129] This novel was adapted into a critically acclaimed film in 2006 by esteemed filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón. I am often urged to watch this film when I mention that I am working on anti-natalism (unrelated: saying that you are sympathetic to anti-natalism is not a good way to make friends at

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scenario" (Scheffler 2013:40), human beings find that they are no longer able to conceive babies. The human race is not destined to go out with a bang, as in the doomsday scenario, but rather will die out entombed within an inescapable, profoundly depressing and soul destroying *ennui*. Unlike in the doomsday scenario, in the infertility scenario, our loved ones will not necessarily die prematurely.[130] Scheffler believes that this demonstrates that it is not merely the imminent death of our loved ones that profoundly affects us, but also the imminent end to humanity itself. Indeed, Scheffler goes so far as to claim that "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" (2013:45).

9.5. Criticisms of Scheffler's view and responses to them

I should note that Thaddeus Metz (2016) distinguishes between a stronger and weaker claim in Scheffler's discussion on the importance of future generations. The stronger claim, which I have just mentioned above, is that the survival of humanity "matters more to us even than our own survival [or the survival of those we love]" (Scheffler 2013:81). The weaker claim is that "the survival of people after our deaths matters greatly to us" (Scheffler 2013:80). To be sure, this is still a significant claim (as Metz acknowledges), because, as discussed above, Scheffler intends for it to encompass not just the fact that the imminent extinction of humanity would cause us great distress; more than this, it would render our lives meaningless.

parties). Presumably, my interlocutors think this film reveals something important about human extinction, and that this tells against anti-natalism.

[130] Though, as P.D. James imagines it, suicides would increase in such a scenario.

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Setting aside the weaker claim, why is it that Scheffler thinks we care more about future generations than we do about ourselves or our loved ones? On Metz's reading of Scheffler, which squares with mine, it is because the latter thinks that the meaningfulness of our activities depends on whether our activities positively contribute to the lives of future humans (Metz 2016:361). Metz calls this the "Contribution View" (2016:361). He gives reasons for rejecting this view (Metz 2016:362-364), not the least of which is the fact that many of us are not in a position to make positive future-oriented contributions of the sort Scheffler envisions—such as, to use one of Scheffler's favoured examples, finding a cure for cancer (Scheffler 2013:24, 25, 26, 27, 38, 42, 53, 75).

However, Metz is sympathetic to Scheffler's stronger claim regarding the importance of future generations, and he offers what he argues is a better explanation for why we might have this perspective. He calls this alternative explanation the "Attachment View" (Metz 2016:364).[131] This view has two main clauses. First, we recognise that "humanity over time is capable of much greater things than an individual" (Metz 2016:364). To use Metz's own examples (2016:365), though Picasso and Einstein both made outstanding and influential contributions in their respective fields (modern art and physics), the subsequent collective contribution of the communities working in these fields is all the more remarkable.

[131] In a later chapter, I show how this view can help defend procreation. The present chapter aims to demonstrate that we reasonably care deeply about meaning in life. Further, as it relates to anti-natalism and limits to the realm of permissible action, the fact that we are oriented in this fashion is of great importance.

The second clause of the Attachment View states that we are "attached" or "close to" the achievements of humanity (Metz 2016:364, 365). Metz thinks that this explains why we would be more affected by the imminent extinction of our species than that of an intelligent extra-terrestrial species: we are "closer to" the achievements of the latter, even if we did not contribute to its creation, or could not assist in its future flourishing (2016:365). Further, the second clause might help explain why we are more distressed by the thought of an extinction in the near term than some time in the distant future. Though we may be able to understand and relate to the sorts of achievements human beings might make, say, 100 years from now, we might not be similarly acquainted with the achievements of our descendants 1500 years into the future (Metz 2016:367-368).

I am inclined to agree with the intuitions Metz appeals to in support of his Attachment View, though I think there are deeper intuitions at work here regarding the importance of advancing the human narrative that deserve to be teased out. I attempt to do just this in the final chapter of this part of my thesis.

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Not everyone agrees with Scheffler that our activities would cease to matter when faced with an imminent extinction. For example, Susan Wolf (2013) opines that either the doomsday or infertility scenario would "profoundly *shift* our understanding of our activities and *shake* the foundations of their having meaning and value for us" (2013:12). But she stops short of endorsing Scheffler's view that meaning and value would be destroyed. She argues that we could still find meaning in comforting and caring for others (Wolf 2013:121). Further, in an attempt to comfort others, we could

"create and perform music and plays, we could plant gardens, hold discussion groups, write books and commentaries" (Wolf 2013:122).

Scheffler is pessimistic regarding the likelihood of such comforting activities being realised in an extinction scenario. For one, Scheffler responds that there has to be a "functioning economy" (2013:186) to support both these comforting activities and basic human needs. He is doubtful that the division of labour would function normally, with people willingly engaged in "business as usual" (Scheffler 2013:187). With, presumably, no farmers (willing) to provide food for those aiming to spend much of their time engaging in comforting activities, such activities would eventually have to be largely abandoned in favour of foraging.[132]

Note that if Scheffler's intuitions are right here, then it gives further insight into just how implausible it would be to believe that human beings could remain motivated to engage in an inter-generational voluntary human extinction project. Presumably, some sort of division of labour would be necessary within such a project. It is difficult to see how this could be sustained. To be clear, these difficulties might not arise due to a shortage of labour, per se—though this would eventually become an issue—but rather due to the absence of meaningful attachment to most activities in such a scenario. As Scheffler puts it, the last humans[133] would be faced with the problem that most activities simply would not seem worth engaging in (2013:188). "The world of value", he says, "would be slipping away like a fistful of sand" (Scheffler 2013:188).

[132] The example is a modification of Scheffler's (2013:186).

[133] Note that when I refer to "the last humans", I mean human beings who *know* that they will be the last people to exist. The motivation problems discussed here would not arise if they did not know their fate, and, therefore, the fate of humanity.

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Like Wolf, Harry Frankfurt (2013) also denies that *all* our activities would cease to matter to us with extinction imminent. This is because, he argues, certain activities matter intrinsically to us. Chiefly, friendship, and certain kinds of intellectual and artistic activities, would remain important to us, regardless of any considerations of humanity's imminent extinction (Frankfurt 2013:133-134). Further, though reactions might vary, with some people indeed being overwhelmed by despair, others might see the imminent end of humanity as an opportunity to do the things they had been putting off. They might seek to repair relationships, or finally engage in activities they had been postponing, such as taking a trip (Frankfurt 2013:135).

These are interesting empirical claims about how we might respond to the awareness that our extinction is imminent. As Frankfurt notes (2013:140), these empirical claims, like all such claims, are to be subjected to verification and testing. But empirical claims such as the ones Scheffler makes about our likely responses to humanity's imminent demise are hard to test, obviously, outside of an actual extinction scenario. Notwithstanding this, in lieu of an actual extinction scenario, if we are to accept the fictional scenario offered to us in P.D. James's novel as a plausible case study, which is what Scheffler seems to ask us to do, then it is difficult to retain much faith in the belief that the last humans will take solace in the activities Frankfurt mentions.

Might the last humans find themselves, like Theo Faron and the other characters in P.D. James's infertility scenario, overcome by an "almost universal negativism" (James 1992:9)? And might even the opportunity, say, to take that trip you had been

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putting off, cease to matter with the prospect of humanity's imminent demise looming on the horizon, as Scheffler argues it will? Though I agree with Frankfurt that people would react differently to the prospect of our extinction, and that some may indeed be able to find *some* solace in pursuing activities they had thus far been putting off,[134] my intuitions ultimately point me in a Schefflerian direction. That is to say, I think that the lives of the last humans will not merely be terrible in the welfarist sense, as Benatar acknowledges, but also in the sense that their lives will be suffocatingly empty of the value that saturates our lives with meaning.

In the case of music, for example, Scheffler argues that music is rewarding to us in a way that goes beyond the mere "brute sensations" (2013:183) we experience when listening to a particular piece. Our enjoyment and appreciation of music can be "impaired by anxiety or impatience or preoccupation" (Scheffler 2013:183). Further, Scheffler (2013:183) directs us to the experiences of the protagonist in *The Children of Men*, Theo Faron, who attempts in vain to fight the crippling "*ennui universel*" (James 1992:9)[135] that overwhelms the last humans by listening to music, reading books, drinking wine, or reflecting on nature:

> Pleasure need not be less keen because there will be centuries of springs to come, their blossom unseen by human eyes, the walls will crumble, the trees die and rot, the gardens revert to weeds and grass, because all beauty will

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[134] In casual conversations involving the end of the world and similar delightful matters, at least one person has told me that he would most probably not be depressed if he learnt that humanity would go extinct in two weeks. Rather, echoing Frankfurt, he opined that he would probably spend his last days doing the things he had thus far been putting off, such as going on holiday to a new country. I do not recall if I brought up Scheffler's point about there needing to be functioning economy to sustain such activities.

[135] That is, "the almost universal negativism", which "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" (James 1992:9).

> outlive the human intelligence which records, enjoys and celebrates it. *I tell myself this, but do I believe it when the pleasure now comes so rarely and, when it does, is so indistinguishable from pain?* (James 1992:9; my emphasis)

Theo Faron recognises, intellectually, that he should be able to derive satisfaction from these former pleasures. And he wants to believe that he can still find a kind of pleasure—though "more intellectual than sensual" (James 1992:9)—in the things that used to bring him joy. But he finds that

> without the hope of posterity, 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. (James 1992:9)

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Theo Faron is unable to enjoy the pleasures of reading or listening to music (etc.) due to his awareness that the human race is very near to its end, and because of the despair this knowledge elicits in him. Frankfurt, however, believes that it would be possible, in principle, for persons in such a scenario to live meaningful, value-laden lives if they could aim to appreciate the "intrinsic and hence always current characteristics" (2013:135) of the things that matter most to human beings, such as music and friendship. Frankfurt is suggesting, in other words, that people set aside what will happen in the future and focus entirely on the present moment (2013:136-137). Might large numbers of the last humans be able to consistently orient their perspectives in this stoical fashion? I am doubtful of this. It is difficult for *us* to do this, and we are

not living with the spectre of imminent extinction discolouring our experience of the world.

Further, it is not clear to me that the things we value most, such as friendship and art, can be divorced from their role in the human project. What an impending extinction would bring to the forefront of our consciousness is the fact that we are not solitary creatures. Rather, we are very much social beings, and each of us, though we might often fancy ourselves as independent from the herd, are characters in the great, dazzling, frustrating, humbling, awe-inspiring, often shameful, but ultimately *meaningful* human narrative.

As I mentioned in Part One, we cannot trace the arc of our existence on this planet—starting, perhaps, with pre-historic cave paintings in mind, and their expression of the distinctly human urge to transcend the limits of personal mortality—and not be moved by the significance of the human project. It is this very project—inchoate, though with certain discernible traits, such as the desire for transcendence of our physical limitations—and the great primordial drives it stirs within us, that will come to an abrupt end with our untimely extinction. And, as Theo Faron's experiences, albeit fictional, attest, the knowledge that it is all coming to an end discolours not merely our enjoyment of many things, but also severs those things from the human narrative—a connection which, to be clear, might be essential to rendering these activities meaningful.

Thus, there would still be the potential for friendship in an extinction scenario, but it would be friendship tinged with desperation and an aching sadness at the awareness

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that these are the world's *last* friendships. There would still be the potential to fall in love, but this might not be the selfless, unconditional love human hearts long to give and to receive; rather, it might be a love that stemmed from "an almost desperate searching for the one person, preferably younger but at least of one's own age, with whom to face the inevitable decline and decay" (James 1992:116). What the shadow of extinction will bring into clear relief for the last humans is that people have hitherto been employing music, literature, and art to document the universal human narrative—one that will now heartbreakingly end.

It might be suggested that the last humans could assuage some or all of this existential suffering through the use of technology. Perhaps they could ride out humanity's last days heavily dosed on "happy pills". Or perhaps—and I am thinking now specifically of a Benatarian phased extinction—genetic intervention could be utilised to create a final generation(s) of humans mercifully spared of the existential suffering that "regular" humans would experience in extinction, or near extinction, scenarios.

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But, to my mind, having to resort to such means underscore the fact that there *is* a moral problem here in terms of the importance of meaning to human flourishing—and a serious one at that. Treating, only symptomatically, the problems that arise when meaning is profoundly threatened raises further moral questions. Are we permitted to deceive ourselves in response to a legitimate threat to meaning in our lives? Or might doing so reduce meaning all the more? (And surely not all people would willingly opt to deceive themselves via happy pills, and the like, so some level of coercion might occur.) Further, if some time in the future the technological means are available to reduce existential suffering in order to help facilitate a phased extinction, then might it

not be possible that there will exist, also, the technological means to significantly reduce pain and suffering of other kinds?

These are difficult questions to answer, but my intuition is that we ought to do all we can to foster meaning. That is to say, instead of dulling our capacity to be moved by meaning, we ought to more conscientiously develop our capacity to direct the human project toward more meaningful ends.

To summarise, both Wolf and Frankfurt both think that the last humans might be able to take comfort from things like friendship and listening to music. But, to my mind, such activities are more likely to make the last humans feel *worse*. For the stories they read and the songs to which they listen will remind them of what is about to be lost forever. Further, it will give them a terrible existential awareness of the great depth of this loss. Indeed, there might be little that could offer comfort to the last humans. These considerations weigh against the anti-natalist's pro-extinction view. For one thing, the anti-natalist suggests voluntary extinction as a solution to human suffering. But, thinking through an actual extinction scenario helps us see that this is not a sensible solution. The suffering of the last humans is bad enough; but the *character* of their suffering reveals something neglected by the anti-natalist, namely the importance of meaning in life. We are not permitted, the present discussion strongly suggests, to sacrifice too much meaning in life. Or, as Wolf would likely argue, sometimes meaning in life is more important than what is morally required.

For Brooke Alan Trisel, the claim that our activities would cease to matter without future generations is "greatly exaggerated" (2004:372-373). Though his views pre-

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date Scheffler's, Trisel offers a persuasive argument against adopting a Schefflerian position, and his ideas are thus important to the present discussion. Trisel is primarily concerned with the notion of adopting the correct standard for judging whether our activities matter. He argues that people often adopt standards that are too strict; chiefly, "long-lastingness" ought not to be included as a criterion (Trisel 2004:379). Adopting long-lastingness stems from a "desperation" to realise a kind of "quasi-immortality" though one's works (Trisel 2004:381).

I think that Trisel is right that many people judge the importance of their actions (Trisel seems to focus on writers, primarily)—and thus, the meaningfulness of their lives—according to this standard, and I agree that they are unreasonable to do this. However, I think that the last humans will experience their lives as lacking in meaning for somewhat different reasons. To my mind, the last human beings will experience great distress not because of an awareness that their own personal narratives will not in fact live on forever, but because they must come to accept that the human narrative itself will not live on. A closer analysis of the desire for immortality, or mere long-lastingness, will reveal why I think this.

My hypothesis is that the desire for immortality through one's works and actions is, at base, a desire to connect with the larger human narrative of cultivating, restoring, and preserving value. It is *this narrative*, we hope, that will live for a long time after our own deaths.[136] It is this narrative that transcends the mundanity of everyday existence, survives the deaths of civilisations, and exists in a kind of quasi-immortal

[136] Scheffler appears to express similar thoughts when he speaks of the importance of one's "place in an ongoing human history" (2013:43, 54).

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realm. We judge our lives to have achieved a kind of quasi-immortality when we touch this realm via singular contributions to the human narrative. But Trisel is correct—we do not need to aim for such lofty honours; our lives are already meaningful, to some degree, in virtue of the fact that we are participants in the ongoing human narrative.[137] Our connection to this narrative is not just unidirectional, moving toward the future; rather, we find meaningful connections in both the past (our ancestry, for example) and the future. And, insofar as our actions in the present can be meaningful, it is because they reflect, in some positive way, the ongoing human value narrative. Extinction threatens to sever this connection at both ends by abruptly annihilating the narrative itself.

Metz's Attachment View is of some relevance here. Recall that Metz argues that we would abhor the extinction of humanity more than we would our own deaths or the deaths of our loved ones because we are "attached" to the achievements of humanity. Recall, further, that Metz believes that this view explains why we would care about extinction in this fashion better than the Contribution View, a view he assigns to Scheffler. According to this latter view, we care more about the survival of humanity than our own survival or the survival of our loved ones because much of what adds meaning to our lives involves contributing to the flourishing of humanity in the future. Again, I think Metz offers a persuasive argument. But here is another way to understand why we appear to have an attachment to humanity's flourishing in the

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[137] I touched upon this in Part One in my discussion on psychopathy, but, again, my own view is that some individuals do not contribute meaningfully to the human narrative. Some individuals do not, and cannot, live meaningful lives, because they are, due to their impaired cognitive orientation, parasitic upon the human narrative. They are, in other words, sites of anti-value. This is a strong claim, I realise, so I do not aim to fully defend it here.

future. To my mind, this attachment reveals something deeper, namely our unique orientation toward, and relationship to, value.

I am of the view that Scheffler's doomsday scenario helps us see that we are not primarily attached to humanity's flourishing in the future, nor are we even attached to the survival of human beings long into the future; rather, we are attached, at base, to human *values.* The last humans would be in mourning not merely for the impending death of humanity, but for the death of (deeply cherished) human values. *And this is exactly the sort of reaction one would expect from creatures whose defining feature is caring about value.*

To be clear, the preceding helps augment Metz's Attachment View. It helps show why his view better explains things than the Contribution View. For example, it gives us further reasons to believe that we can live meaningful lives even if we do not engage in activities that might directly contribute to the flourishing of future humans (such as engaging in cancer research).[138] We are, merely by symbiotically engaging in the ongoing construction of the human narrative, "contributing" to the flourishing of the world of human value. And we are attached to this world of human value, so much so that we care more about it that our own survival or the survival of our loved ones.

Here are a couple more reasons to accept this view of value I am presenting vis-à-vis extinction. Firstly, think back to Trisel's claim that certain people unreasonably adopt

[138] Metz (2016:361) lists several examples of activities he claims Scheffler thinks would be rendered meaningless if humanity were to become extinct, including working on cancer research and fighting climate change.

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the criterion of long-lastingness to judge the merit of their works, something writers in particular tend to do.[139] My understanding of our relationship to value can help to explain why they make this mistake. It is not unreasonable to think that one's works might achieve long-lastingness; rather, it is unreasonable to judge those works as meaningful only if they achieve that status. However, if one's works are to achieve long-lastingness, it is because those works speak to some fundamental dimension of the human experience—some essential quality or set of features to being human that one shares with one's ancestors, and which will connect one's ancestors to oneself. This quality is the capacity to care about a certain cluster of values, and the attendant attachment to the ongoing human narrative this capacity elicits.

Secondly, this way of looking at value explains why it would be wrong for the last humans to destroy all of humanity's artworks before doomsday (presuming they thought that doomsday would not destroy all of these artworks anyway).[140] These artworks document human values, and are thus sites of value themselves that could in time be appreciated by extra-terrestrial explorers or post-human beings who evolve on earth who care about the same cluster of values. (Perhaps the last humans could find some solace in this thought?)[141] To be sure, the extinction of humanity would be terrible, but there is a way the last humans could make it *worse*, namely by destroying the sites of the greatest repositories of human value. And what this brings to the fore is that the ultimate tragedy of human extinction would be the death of value itself.

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[139] One might suggest that writers are particularly sensitive to the human need to engage in narrative-making.
[140] What can we make of cultures where beautiful works of art are ritually destroyed? For example, what about Buddhist monks who painstakingly create mandalas out of sand and then destroy them? As I understand them, such rituals are meant to sensitise us to the kind of point I am trying to make: We care about value, and we *should* care about it. And realising the fragility of value through such ritual reflections helps us appreciate value.
[141] Shiffrin uses a similar example (2013:154-5).

I am not alone in thinking about extinction in this manner. Seana Shiffrin (2013) offers similar insights into our relationship to value, and how we might react to the loss of value that our extinction would represent. To Shiffrin, our extinction would be nothing short of the death of *valuing* itself:

> [W]hat is *horrifying* about the infertility scenario is less the comprehensive discontinuation of the *specific* things we value, terrible as that is, and more the discontinuation of something more particular and more abstract, namely the brutal interruption and discontinuation of *valuing* —of the recognition of what matters and the undertaking of practices of enacting and realizing valuable things because we appreciate their value. (Shiffrin 2013:153; her emphasis)

Though we do not always want things of value to last forever—in other words, we respond to value in ways that belie a "conservatism about value" (Shiffrin 2013:144)—we typically want to preserve value, and are distressed if things of value expire without good reason. To Shiffrin, what is most horrifying about the possibility of our sudden extinction is not merely that human existence will end, but rather that it will end "*for no adequate justificatory reason*" (Shiffrin 2013:153; her emphasis). She points out that ordinarily, when activities we value end for good reasons, we are saddened but not unavoidably driven to "despair"—that is to say, such endings do not "render our efforts to pursue appropriate reasons and values pointless" (Shiffrin 2013:151). However, when the things we value end for no reason or for bad reasons, they

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> inspire a special kind of dismay or despair [due to the fact that] forces other than reason-based responses dictate what happens and that this fact can make our reason-oriented activity seem futile or pointless. (Shiffrin: 2013:151)

This futility and pointlessness would be most distressing were the human project come to a close before we can achieve some "compulsory end"—which, for Shiffrin, means "the achievement of relations of justice and stable, ongoing, rather than sporadic, relations of moral decency" (2013:153). Were we to achieve these goals, our extinction would be somewhat less distressing. But note that these goals are very different from the goal of the pro-extinction anti-natalist. His goal, recall, is to end human suffering. Might the last humans in a voluntary human extinction project think that they are engaged in a "reason-oriented activity", one that renders the end of the much valued human project less "futile" or "pointless"? I do not think that they would be able to find comfort in this fashion.

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I am inclined to agree with Shiffrin's claims regarding our conservative orientation toward value, and I think that her discussion of value highlights some important points about the future of humanity. Like me, Shiffrin does not believe that it matters, ultimately, that activities led by *humans* continue, but rather that *rational agents* can continue these activities (Shiffrin 2013:154-155). However, as I read her, I do not think that she would agree that *caring about* a *specific cluster of values* is what is ultimately of importance. I disagree, and, as I will argue in Part Three, these intuitions suggest both arguments for, limits to, the transhumanism project. In terms of limits, specifically, we may be morally prohibited from modifying ourselves in

ways that lead us not to care about the specific cluster of values that we currently cherish.

9.6. A reply to Benatar on meaning

I should at this point mention David Benatar's own reply to (a version of) the meaning objection. Benatar does not dispute that our lives can be meaningful, but he argues that while our lives can appear meaningful from our human perspective, they apparently lack meaning when viewed from the perspective of the universe, or eternity (2006:82-84). Benatar uses this perspective to argue that we often should judge our lives by "supra-human" standards (2006:85). As I understand him, he intends for us to believe that we should judge the meaningfulness of human life in general from this perspective, and that when we do this, we will conclude that human life in general "is found wanting" (Benatar 2006:86)

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Benatar here is in fact appealing to the sort of theory of meaning that Metz (2009, 2013) explicitly argues against. Briefly, Metz argues that our judgements about meaning ought to be circumscribed by what is possible for us as human beings to achieve, given nature's laws (Metz 2013:157). In contrast to Benatar's promotion of supra-human standards, Metz argues that it would be unreasonable for us to judge our lives in relation to the sort of life a "transhuman superfreak" could enjoy (Metz 2013:156):

> Imagine that an inhuman superfreak like Superman lived among us, but that

> we had no opportunity to become one of his species. Should being in the presence of another, greater species, or perhaps merely being able to imagine one, be considered relevant to judging whether our lives count as meaningful or not […]? My answer is a firm 'no'. (Metz 2013:157-158)

I find this Metzian perspective on perspectives convincing, and I make appeals to it for the remainder of this section. Metz (2013:243-244, 245-246) argues that our value judgments are the product of natural selection, and are thus informed by a human perspective. However, Benatar asserts that critics who fail to see his point—Metz included—suffer from "a simple failure of imagination" (Benatar 2012:152)!

I have already responded, in part, to Benatar's views regarding the appropriate perspective from which we ought to judge the meaningfulness of our lives. Recall from Part One that I asked the reader to employ his or her imagination to think about how we might be viewed by a race of extra-terrestrial beings who care about a similar cluster of values as we do. I argued that their gaze would affirm our intrinsic value as a species, as well as the great loss of value our extinction would represent. As I said there, though their perspective would not quite be *sub specie aeternitatis*, it would nevertheless be external to ours and morally relevant. Similar things might be said about whether our lives would have (or lack) meaning from their perspective, but to see how this is so, we might have to extend our imaginations further still.

Assume that this extra-terrestrial species has had, and continues to maintain ties with, hundreds of other intelligent species beyond our galaxy. And suppose that there is a whole realm of value out there to which we could be introduced. Imagine that all

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these species are eager to commune with us, to enter into an interstellar project of meaning-making with us. Suppose we could be transported to distant, earth-like worlds inhabited by beings who have seen beyond the event horizons of black holes, beings for whom dark matter no longer keeps secrets, beings who adorn themselves with elegant garments of light, and who radiate what we would we (and they) would experience as love.

Now return from these fantasies and imagine looking up at the night sky and wondering what might be out there, hidden deep in the inconceivable vastness of space. The aim of this exercise has been to point out something at once very simple but also difficult to elucidate: Our appetite for meaning is boundless. Perhaps this aspect of ourselves is what drove our earliest ancestors to cross oceans, and perhaps it is what motivates us to explore outer space. It is no small fact that our drive and capacity to engage with the universe in a meaning-making fashion even incorporates distant worlds into our narrative.[142] It seems Benatar should respond to the claim that we should instead wonder how *much* meaning-making is possible in this universe for creatures like us.

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And so, we could agree with Benatar that our lives perhaps have meaning only from the perspective of our own species, while yet asserting that the burden of proof falls on him to show us why the perspective of the universe is of such great importance. To help understand why this would be a tough task for Benatar, consider these analogies to welfarist goods we currently enjoy as Earth-based *human* experiencers.

[142] The burgeoning field of space ethics has yet to give adequate consideration to meaning in life. For a recent book on space ethics, see Arnould (2011).

Suppose I learn, somehow, that some of the greatest chocolate in the universe is produced in a galaxy 10 billion light years from Earth. This does nothing to diminish my enjoyment of the chocolate that *is* available to me. Or suppose that this chocolate is somehow made available to me on Earth, but I am told that my taste buds are far too primitive to appreciate its exquisite flavour. Or perhaps I am told that my digestion is too weak to digest this interstellar chocolate, and that I may fall very ill by ingesting it. Again, none of this makes any difference to my enjoyment of Earth chocolate. And, to give one last analogy, the fact that there are symphonies somewhere out there in the universe that our ears cannot hear or our minds cannot process does not make the symphonies we *can* appreciate any less moving.

Benatar has another challenge to meaning as a natal-friendly value. He believes that his asymmetry argument can accommodate meaning under the welfarist schema of his asymmetry argument (2012:131-132). But I am unsure as to whether his anti-natal arguments apply with the same force when considering meaning as a value. Here are a couple of prima facie reasons to doubt that they can.

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First, Benatar seems to neglect an important asymmetry between meaning and welfarist goods, such as pleasure.[143] There does not seem to be a limit to the amount of meaning a person can strive to have in his or her life. In contrast, a welfarist good such a pleasure is often best enjoyed in limited quantities, lest we become satiated or temporarily numb to its effects.[144]

[143] Metz (2013:65-73) lists other differences between meaning and pleasure.
[144] I should note, though, that some meaning comes from sacrifice, and there are limits to how much we would be willing to sacrifice to gain meaning.

To be sure, it is possible to neglect our well-being by chasing too fervently ends that we think are most meaningful. Think here, perhaps, of an overzealous pastor whose demeanour isolates him from friends and family, and who neglects to care for his bodily needs. But even here, it is not the quantity of meaningfulness that is the issue, but rather a failure to acknowledge that welfarist goods are also necessary to fuel and sustain a human life. What is not at issue is whether there is a real "upper limit", as it were, to our capacity to flourish via engaging in meaningful pursuits.

Second, another quality of meaning that Benatar might want to explore is its potential posthumous benefits. No one has a choice in terms of coming into existence, but it is possible to be taken out of existence (or to take oneself out of it) in a manner that others will view as having had bestowed (greater) meaning upon one's life. Meaning, unlike pleasure, can be increased even after one's life has ended.[145] With these considerations in mind, perhaps a case could be made for the view that the asymmetry argument does not capture meaningfulness, as "harms" and "benefits" do not simply cease accruing to individuals once they have gone out of existence. Perhaps, though, Benatar would want to say that much depends on the semantics of "coming into existence"—perhaps he would say that his asymmetry schema can be extended to incorporate posthumous existence! There is room for debate here, I will acknowledge.

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The important thing to remember is that Benatar is concerned with what we ought to do *from the (hypothetical) interests of the children we could conceive.* And, again, if

[145] This point is discussed in Metz (2013:70).

we analyse the ethics of procreation taking into account these considerations alone, then Benatar might very well be correct in concluding that it would be wrong for us to conceive new people.

But I have been taking a different tact. I have been analysing the morality of procreation in a manner that goes beyond our duties to potential children. Most importantly, I have been examining whether our moral actions are constrained in ways Benatar and other anti-natalists might not have realised. As with what I said about dignity, the claim I defend in this part of my thesis is that the role meaning plays in the human condition places constraints upon what we may or may not do. I have been arguing that the role it plays forbids us from aiming at our own extinction. Thus, notwithstanding Benatar's claims regarding the status of meaning in life as a type of well-being, many other extinction-prohibiting concerns regarding meaning in life need to be taken into account when coming to an all-things-considered judgement of the moral permissibility of procreation.

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9.7. A final end to the human project: a proposal

I have argued that meaning in life is an important non-welfarist good that is neglected by anti-natalism. Specifically, I have argued that a thoroughgoing anti-natalism leading to extinction would ask us to sacrifice more meaning than is morally permitted. I now look closer at a reason for why the possibility of extinction fills us with dread. Perhaps what might contribute to the existential angst suffered by the last humans is the sense that after millennia of striving and sacrifice, the human narrative is deserving of a better, more satisfactory denouement.

I first consider a very compelling set of ideas defended by Trisel (2016) that suggest that awareness of our impending extinction, if certain conditions are met, need not strike us as tragic. Trisel's claims revolve around the notion of a satisfactory ending to the human narrative. Though I am in agreement with him regarding the importance of a satisfactory ending, I argue that his suggestion of what would constitute a suitable ending ought to be revised[146] in light of a) anti-natalism and b) transhumanism.

In his examination of what a satisfactory end to humanity might look like, Trisel draws upon the notion of "narrative closure" (2016:15). He understands this sort of closure as serving "a meaning-enhancing role" in one's life, such that one's life ending in this fashion "can elevate one's entire life story" (Trisel 2016:15). This is an intriguing idea, and I think it might also explain why we are more troubled by an extinction that will occur sooner rather than later. An impending extinction event brings into stark relief the fact that the various threads of the grand human narrative are not going to be joined together into a satisfactory ending. On the other hand, an extinction that we know will happen, but only sometime in the very distant future, does not affect us as much (if it affects us at all). And perhaps one reason for this is that we believe *we still have some time* to discover and pursue some final end as a species that will render the human project meaningful.

Trisel himself has in mind the following sort of narrative ending:

[146] This is because arguably the least controversial truth that anti-natalism promotes is that procreation is morally problematic, and this limits the realm of permissible moral actions, and thus the number and type of narrative endings available to us.

> Human beings overcame many obstacles and persisted for a long time before perishing through no fault of their own. They made many great achievements, including discovering how life originated and formulating a "Theory of Everything." They knew that their works would be lost when humanity became extinct, but this did not matter because these works were created to benefit human beings and they had served their purpose. From the beginning, human beings struggled with their finitude and other limitations, but using their rationality, they eventually came to appreciate and accept these limitations. (Trisel 2016:18)

Note that such an ending would not be possible in a voluntary phased extinction, which, as I have discussed, would be experienced as devastatingly meaningless. Trisel's suggested end to the human race, however, "would be worthy of pride" (Trisel 2016:18). This is because the ending Trisel proposes would have as its "last word" the "*acceptance* of our finitude and other limitations" (Trisel 2016:18; author's emphasis). Part of what we must accept as a species is that, limited as we are, we could not hope to ever achieve all our "deepest desires" (Trisel 2016:18). In contrast, the sorts of extinctions discussed by Scheffler (unexpected) and Benatar (voluntary, phased) would end as tragedies. Crucially, Benatar's proposal of a phased extinction seems to completely neglect the importance of narrative closure. But below are my suggestions of how Benatar might respond in light of Trisel's claims regarding the importance of narrative closure.

Because it brings to light the fact that procreation is inherently morally problematic, I think Benatar would argue (and I would agree) that anti-natalism ought to be taken

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seriously when considering what sort of ending would bring narrative closure. After all, he might argue that humanity could gain redemption via a phased extinction! Perhaps he might argue that a species that has reached a level of intellectual and moral maturity to recognise the (unnecessary) intra- and inter-species suffering it has perpetuated for millenia, and has acquired the moral resolve to put an end to its suffering through stoically ceasing to perpetuate itself, is a species that has written itself a noble (though bittersweet) ending to its narrative.

This Benatarian ending to the human narrative is somewhat alluring to me, but I believe that its appeal largely consists in the stoic perspective it advises us to adopt in relation to our own extinction. There is no reason why this stoicism cannot be a feature of other suggested narrative endings (it certainly seems to be part of Trisel's proposed ending) that do not involve us giving in fatalistically to our own demise. For (as I practice it, at least) stoicism need not entail pessimism. It is possible for us to maintain a stoic resolve whilst still striving to improve the human condition; Trisel's suggested narrative ending seems to acknowledge this, marrying stoicism with a species-typical striving to transcending the limitations of the human condition.

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I will note that we have some way to go before we can hope for an ending like the one Trisel proposes. For one thing, notwithstanding humanity's other remarkable achievements, we have yet to formulate a "Theory of Everything". And only a small fraction of the population has come close to accepting the limitations of being human. But I still think that Trisel's suggested ending to the human narrative is a powerful one, and that it neatly embodies the sorts of values I have been discussing vis-à-vis

what makes us human. And here is how we might direct ourselves along a path that might lead to flourishing in the manner Trisel envisages.

It strikes me that the best way to achieve the goal of avoiding a meaningless or otherwise tragic end to the human narrative is if we embrace human enhancement technologies. Firstly, such technologies might help protect us from going extinct prematurely due to pandemics, natural disasters, or the like. Second, and this relates most directly to anti-natalism, we are arguably morally required to work toward the eradication of unnecessary pain and suffering, and human enhancement technologies promise to help with this. And finally, enhancement technologies might help us engineer more virtuous humans.

I discuss these ideas below in Part Three, when I look at transhumanism, and how this movement bears upon the issue of permissible procreation. But I should first acknowledge, briefly, the concern that transhumanist interventions could threaten meaning. For example, it has been suggested that radically extending human lifespans could have the unintended consequence of producing mundane and ultimately meaningless lives.[147] In attempting to defend transhumanism against these sorts of claims, I cannot offer a detailed overview of the literature on meaning in life vis-à-vis transhumanism here.[148] However, I will note out that plausible arguments in defence of the possibility of meaningful transhuman (and posthuman) lives have been forwarded.

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[147] See, for example, Kass (2001) and Williams (1973).
[148] For such an overview, see Sandberg (2014).

For example, it has been argued that one way to live a more meaningful life is to adopt cybernetic enhancements that allow for the most extensive expression of our most admirable (human) capacities (Reid 2009); that posthumans could in fact have greater capacities for engaging in meaningful activities (Bostrom 2008); and that extreme enhancement could help one produce the sorts of objective goods that confer meaning upon a life,[149] or help us attain great meaning by assisting us transcend our animal selves—that is, that part of ourselves focussed on responding to basic biological needs[150] (Danaher 2014).

9.8. Meaning and non-Benatarian forms of anti-natalism

This title of this section is somewhat misleading. I have structured it to maintain symmetry with the title of the concluding chapter of the previous section. But I do not talk about the views of Shiffrin et al. here. To be honest, I am not sure what I could add anything meaningful (no pun intended) to what I said there. I do, however, speculate as to how anti-natalists might react under the crisis of meaning that would occur in a Schefflerian extinction scenario. Stated more forcefully: Under the pressure of such extraordinary times, I examine how the arguments of anti-natalists, and the intuitions informing them, hold up, and what might this teach us about *our* duties to ourselves and future generations. It is difficult to think through such matters, and perhaps unwise to endorse too strongly any "insights" gathered, so I will venture to offer only a brief discussion.

[149] See: Smuts (2013).
[150] See: Metz (2011b).

I have agreed with Scheffler that living through an extinction event, such as the ones he describes,[151] would indeed be encountered as an agonising crisis of value. But further, this crisis would reveal to us the crumbling value infrastructure, as it were, that had hitherto sustained human meaning-making and propelled the human narrative. This would be a time of great mourning. And mourning is a mighty kind of suffering. Loss reminds us of the depth of our caring for value. It also hints to us the depths of the darkness to which value is taken, never to be seen again. Loss is disorienting: It reveals to us that our grip on the terra firma of value is never certain, and that, like dark magic, the earth could open up unexpectedly and reclaim what we most cherish. One moment, here; the next, *gone*. There is this unnerving disconnect between the intensity of our ability to cherish and the world's ability to suddenly and so completely take it away from us. It is almost as if at the centre of our world, there lurks a value black hole. To my mind, anti-natalists at the funeral of humanity, careening toward that final chasm, would not find much comfort in telling themselves: "Now, no longer will others have to suffer."

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It is one thing to talk about the likes of voluntary extinction when one lives in times of abundance, as we do now. There is no real threat of us dying out, no impeding doomsday rapidly draining the meaning out of our lives. I have been invited to speak on anti-natalism webcasts. There are communities—dare I say it, *thriving* communities—of anti-natalists online. What they all have in common is that they are part of the meaning-making human narrative. Whether one lives in isolation but writes books about the misery of being born,[152] or broadcasts one's misery daily in

[151] Recall that Scheffler discusses two: the "doomsday scenario" (2013:18-19) and the "infertility scenario" (2013:40).
[152] Yes, I'm looking at you, Mr Schopenhauer, Mr Cioran.

HD,[153] one does so sustained by the world of value. One may choose to cast oneself out of this world of value (and when one does, it is always, for many reasons, a tragedy), but part of oneself will forever be etched into the human narrative—unless this narrative, too, is cast out from the world.

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[153] 4K is *much* too cheery.

Part Three

Anti-natalism and Transhumanism

10. Flying without wings: Icarus reimagined[154]

Shell smashed, juices flowing;

Wings twitch, legs are going.

Don't get sentimental;

It always ends up drivel.

One day, I am gonna grow wings:

A chemical reaction;

Hysterical and useless,

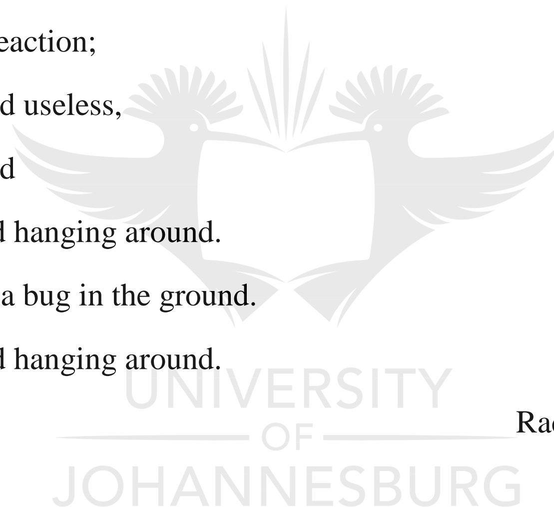
Hysterical and

Let down and hanging around.

Crushed like a bug in the ground.

Let down and hanging around.

Radiohead (*Let Down*)[155]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10.1. Introduction

In the first two parts of this thesis, I challenged the anti-natalist assumption that harm is the all-important factor when evaluating the permissibility of procreation. I did this by examining the idea that non-welfarist goods, specifically dignity and meaning, should be given greater consideration by participants on both sides of the natal debate.

[154] With apologies.
[155] Radiohead (1997).

In contrast, in this part of my thesis I examine whether procreation can in fact be defended on welfarist grounds. Specifically, I consider the possibility that procreation need not in fact lead to "great harm", as Benatar argues, or indeed to harm at all. With reference to Benatar's weaker form of anti-natalism, a typical life may indeed contain too much harm, represent too much risk to the potential person, to be permissible. But what if it didn't contain as much harm as it typically does today? What if it contained far less harm, or even none at all? I examine these sorts of possibilities by looking at procreation in light of the controversial transhumanist movement.

Briefly, transhumanists believe that we ought to use technology to biologically alter the human species to become, in a manner of speaking, more than human—*trans*human. Perhaps the most attractive reason to adopt such a course of action, they argue, is that we will eventually be able to, and indeed ought to, abolish pain and undue suffering from the human condition—a view known as "abolitionism". If so-called "abolitionists" are right that such a feat is possible, then creation need not represent a great harm; on the contrary, it will look more like Shiffrin's idea of a "pure benefit"—the bestowing of which need involve no harm, or perhaps only a morally insignificant level of harm (Shiffrin 1999:124). It should be apparent that transhumanist ideas like abolitionism can be used to undercut the more moderate version of Benatar's anti-natalism—and perhaps even the more extreme version.

Perhaps not yet a doctrinal movement or philosophy (Sandberg 2014), transhumanist thought is nonetheless gaining in popularity. However, despite being applied to issues

like moral enhancement[156] and even as a means to avoiding the dangers of extinction,[157] transhumanism has yet to be systematically applied to anti-natalism. I suspect that transhumanism can offer, at least in principle, a forceful and illuminating challenge to anti-natalism. Thus, in this part of my thesis, I explore whether or not it would be permissible to bring "humans" of a sufficiently altered physical makeup into the world—even if anti-natalists are indeed correct that it is not permissible to create "normal" humans.

The transhumanist project primarily aims at radical human enhancement. An "enhancement" in this context can be understood as an intervention "designed to improve human form or functioning beyond what is necessary" (Juengst 1998:29). Typically, enhancement is contrasted with treatment (of disease, disability, or injury), where the latter is seen, at least by opponents of enhancement, as less morally troublesome. Transhumanists emphasise such enhancements as vastly improved memory and intelligence (that is, beyond genius level), greatly extended life spans, as well as the eradication of disease itself. Note that though I shall use the terms "human enhancement" and "transhumanism" interchangeably, the transhumanist project also includes such themes as space colonisation and the technological singularity.[158]

Broadly speaking, transhuman interventions are defended by arguing that we should aim toward perfecting (aspects of) human nature. In general, I do not explicitly argue

[156] See Fenton (2010).
[157] See Bostrom (2003).
[158] The concept of "the Singularity" refers to a point in the future when technological progress will reach such a great state of advancement that human life will be irrevocably transformed (see Kurzweil 2005).

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for transhumanist interventions from this perfectionist perspective.[159] In contrast, I focus primarily on the possibility of radical pain reduction and the eradication of disease. Crucially, I use anti-natalism to argue not just that transhumanism is morally permissible, but that it is a moral requirement for ethical procreation. To the best of my knowledge, the two have not been compared in this way before, let alone utilised to strengthen each other's case.

Note, though, that while I shall also demonstrate how transhumanist aims can be morally justified, I nevertheless do not need to wholeheartedly endorse these same aims. Nor do I need to conclusively demonstrate that the aims of the transhumanist movement are ultimately achievable.[160] I do however need to show, at the very least, that the idea of human enhancement does not violate any of the anti-natalist's own moral values. Anti-natalists are not (always) nihilists. For example, Benatar concedes that retaining a legal right to procreate is advisable, on the grounds that enforcing a ban will possibly lead to "appalling state invasions of privacy and bodily intrusions", something his "liberal instincts" are "troubled" by (2006:110). Further, I need to present an argument for why an anti-natalist—and *specifically* an anti-natalist—really ought to re-examine his position in light of transhumanist aims.

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[159] Though I will, in a sense, be forwarding an argument for perfectionism from the view that we would best be representing our *current* sense of what it means to be our best possible selves by adopting aspects of the transhumanist project for *future* people.
[160] Though, on this point, the prominent transhumanists Nick Bostrom and Julian Savulescu assert that the question of human enhancement has shifted from "'Is this science fiction?' to 'Should we do it?'" (2009:18). Further, Michael Bess (2008:121) is careful to stress that transhumanist aims "are no longer a topic of fantasy." In contrast, Tom Koch (2010:687-689) has a more sceptical view of the transhumanism project.

I suggest, then, that this chapter be viewed as serving the purpose of a thought experiment, one which helps us answer the following question: If transhumanists are right that we can (and should) eradicate pain and suffering from the human condition, does this not seriously challenge the anti-natal claim that procreation is always an impermissible harm?[161] I assume that anti-natalists hold their views for philanthropic, and not misanthropic, reasons.[162] Specifically, I assume that anti-natalists are motivated by a sincere desire to address the problem of unnecessary human suffering. I argue, however, that anti-natalists ought not to be satisfied with human extinction as a solution to this problem.[163] In other words, the arguments of this chapter are intended to demonstrate why transhumanism can offer anti-natalists, at least in principle, an arguably more optimistic solution to the problem of human suffering.

Here is another way of understanding the how I envisage transhumanism could offer a powerful response to anti-natalism. Though I accept, for the sake of argument, that human lives are typically filled with serious amounts of harm, and that this demands we take anti-natalism seriously, it need not be the case that an examination of the morality of procreation ought to stop here. There is also a practical point involving choosing between our efforts to extinguish "normal" human beings, and the possibility of creating "evolved" human beings—that is to say, choosing between a

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[161] Another way of asking this question would be as follows: Ought not the prospect of pain-free human lives prompt the anti-natalist to reconsider his position (and ought not the threat of extinction prompt the bio-conservative to reconsider his opposition to radical enhancement)?
[162] Benatar (2015) examines, but does not endorse, a misanthropic argument for anti-natalism.
[163] Intriguingly, even if one wishes to remain a pro-extinction anti-natalist, even given the prospect of procreating transhumans, one should nevertheless see the merits in adopting transhumanism in terms of its potential to *decrease the badness of extinction*. By this I mean, extinction would still be bad for the last generation of transhumans, but perhaps they might be better suited to endure it. Perhaps, for example, they might be able to face the prospect of extinction cheerfully, painlessly, and without being traumatised by the fear of death—a fear we "regular" humans feel so acutely.

phased extinction, or a phased *evolution*. Anti-natalists have spent their time promoting the former, but should examine the latter, because (as I have thus far argued, and continue to argue below) addressing the problem of human suffering by aiming at our extinction ought to be viewed as an option that is off the table, as it were.

I begin with some preliminary remarks on the value of pain (10.2.). The fact that pain has instrumental value does nothing to convince the anti-natalist that procreation might be permissible. Indeed, he would rather us choose extinction over continued existence. But I demonstrate why the experience of pain—particularly extreme pain or chronic pain that serves no useful purpose—need not be an inescapable fact of coming into existence. Here, I survey empirical issues of how such harm reduction might be realistically achieved. The transhumanist's aims of reducing pain, or eliminating it altogether, are not far-fetched.

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I then give a brief overview of transhumanism (10.3.), in particular its aim to eradicate pain and unnecessary suffering. Chapter 11 is then devoted to salient objections to transhumanism found in the literature on this topic, as well as the most forceful responses to these objections. I follow this with a discussion on "world-regarding duties" (Chapter 12), which ties in the claims of Part One with transhumanism. Recall that I argued in Part Two that we have a prima facie duty to avoid extinction, one which demands, at the very least, that we—including anti-natalists—look beyond anti-natalism's solution of voluntary extinction. Lastly, I argue that on a more thorough all-things-considered view of the morality of

procreation and the future of humanity, instead of adopting Benatar's "phased extinction", we ought to instead adopt a "phased evolution"—that is, a radical human enhancement project of the sort envisioned by transhumanists (12.1. through to 12.3.).

10.2. Preliminary remarks on the value of pain

Since it occupies such a fundamental role in the human condition, I must say a little about the phenomenon of pain and its value to us. Both the transhumanist and anti-natalist would prefer a pain-free existence, though only the former believes that such an existence is nomologically possible. The latter, the anti-natalist, would rather have us go extinct than suffer indefinitely as a species. In contrast to these two parties, there are far stricter limits to which the bioconservative friend of human nature would go in order to address the problem of pain. It is to a deeper examination of these issues that I now turn. I show how it is not unrealistic to believe that (altered) humans will one day enjoy lives free of unnecessary pain and suffering. Creating children therefore need not always represent bringing them into "a world of suffering", which is significant for at least the weaker form of anti-natalism.

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It is very clear that the anti-natalist dislikes pain and suffering—so much so that he advises against starting even the very best (unenhanced) lives. But there remains an important criticism of this thoroughgoing anti-pain stance, namely the view that pain serves an important instrumental value. Focusing exclusively on Benatar's more moderate argument for anti-natalism, Brooke Alan Trisel (2012) attempts to demonstrate why Benatar's perspective on pain is incomplete and ultimately in error.

To Trisel, our lives are overall better for the phenomenon of pain. Pain serves at least three valuable purposes (Trisel 2012:83): Pain alerts us to danger, teaches us which harmful stimuli to avoid, and prevents us from inflicting further harm upon ourselves if we have already been injured. In order to illustrate the importance of pain, Trisel offers (2012:83), as do I, the example of children born with the condition known as congenital insensitivity to pain, and whose lives are as a result often short and injury-riddled. However, Trisel does not fully consider, as I do here, the pain-eradicating possibilities of genetic enhancement. I return to this thought in a moment.

Trisel offers a further argument against Benatar's views on pain and suffering. To Trisel, Benatar proposes too extreme a standard for measuring which lives are worth starting. This standard, which Trisel calls "the perfection standard" (2012:89), is not, he claims, nomologically possible, meaning it is not (physically) possible given the actual laws of the universe. The perfection standard is thus an "arbitrary" standard (Trisel 2012:87-90). Instead, Trisel advises that our standard for judging which lives are worth starting ought to be nomologically possible, and not merely logically possible (2012:88-89). Crucially for Trisel, it is not nomologically possible for humans to thrive without pain or negative mental states. He concludes that we ought to thus adopt a different standard to the perfection standard, one which is in fact nomologically possible, and which will, he thinks, allow for procreation.

This standard, the "threshold conception of harm" (Trisel 2012:80), assumes that the quality of the very best human lives today cannot physically be improved upon, and that it is thus unreasonable for us to posit another standard for judging which lives are good. Indeed, to his mind, even people in the (near?) future "could not have a much

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higher quality of life than a person of today who has a high quality life" (Trisel 2012:90). It is therefore permissible to procreate if we are fairly sure that lives of such a sufficiently good quality will result. Further, even if it were possible to eradicate pain and suffering via genetic engineering, it would be "unwise" to do so (Trisel 2012:90).

To summarise, Trisel's response to Benatar's weaker argument for anti-natalism is that the status quo isn't nearly as bad as Benatar makes it out to be—that this is not, in fact, "a world of suffering"—and that his standard for judging which lives are worth starting is impossibly extreme. Trisel's counter-advice to the anti-natalist's solution of extinction is thus that we ought to continue with some version of the status quo. But I am arguing that the choice is not between continuing the status quo and extinction. Both Trisel and Benatar neglect to recognise a third option—and a nomologically possible one at that.

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It is in fact nomologically possible for humans who do not feel pain to exist, and for them to successfully survive—albeit with considerable parental supervision during childhood—into adulthood. Further, this condition seems to arise from the mutation of a single gene, *SCN9A* (Cox, et al. 2006), meaning that it is within the realm of possibility that genetic engineering or pharmaceutical interventions will one day be able to allow for the intentional creation of pain-free humans. Indeed, very recent research has demonstrated that this may indeed by possible. But first some history.

After hearing about a ten-year-old Pakistani street performer whose "stage act" consisted of such seemingly superhuman stunts as piercing his arms with knives

(sadly, the boy died at age thirteen after jumping off a roof), a team of researchers (namely, Cox et al.) interviewed and examined six congenitally pain-free children from three related Pakistani families.[164] None of the children had ever felt pain in any part of their body, though the older children had learnt to mimic the pain responses they observed in other children, pretending, for example, to be hurt after a football tackle (Cox et al. 2006:894). All the children had self-inflicted injuries to their lips and/or tongue, most had suffered (painlessly) fractures (discovered later by their parents only due to limping or lack of use of a limb), and all regularly picked up cuts and bruises (Cox et al. 2006:894).

Yet, apart from their complete inability to feel pain, and these injuries, the children were otherwise healthy and of normal intelligence (Cox et al. 2006:894-5). All of them could recognise the sensations of touch, warm and cold temperature, proprioception, tickle and pressure (Cox et al. 2006:895). They all had normal vision and hearing (Cox et al. 2006:895). Their siblings and parents could sense pain normally (Cox et al. 2006:895).

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After close study, it was discovered that a mutation of the *SCN9A* gene was the cause of the children's otherwise healthy pain-free state (Cox et al. 2006:894). Specifically, this mutation results in a loss of function in the voltage-gated sodium channel *SCN9A* encodes, namely subunit $Na_v1.7$ (Cox et al. 2006:896). Sodium channels are proteins

[164] The authors of this study note that "there are two schools of thought in the literature for distinguishing between congenital insensitivity to pain and congenital indifference to pain" (Cox et al. 2006:897). Observing that the persons in their study had initially been diagnosed with an indifference to pain, but that insensitivity to pain would have been the more accurate diagnosis, the authors decide to introduce a new category: "channelopathy-associated insensitivity to pain" (Cox et al. 2006:897). For the sake of brevity, as well as continuity with much of the literature on this subject, I shall continue to refer to this condition as "congenital insensitivity to pain".

which excite neurons, and $Na_v1.7$, plays a role in generating the electrical signals between sensory neurons involved in pain (Cox et al. 2006:896).

Another, more recent study (namely, Minett et al. 2015), shows that there may be a way to replicate the symptoms of congenital insensitivity to pain in normal individuals using drug therapy, but it is a little complicated. Mice genetically engineered to lack the $Na_v1.7$ sodium channel are pain-free (Minett et al. 2015:2). However, administering drugs intended to block the activity of $Na_v1.7$ to unaltered mice failed to reproduce the same pain-free state (Minett et al. 2015:2,5). A breakthrough in ascertaining why this was the case was the discovery that $Na_v1.7$ also plays a role in the regulation of opioid peptides, which are painkilling molecules (Minett et al. 2015:2). It turns out that deletion of $Na_v1.7$ results not only in decreased sensitivity to pain, but also the increased production of pain-blunting opioids (Minett et al. 2015:2). When mice lacking $Na_v1.7$ are given drugs to block the effects of these opioids, they feel pain just like unaltered mice (Minett et al. 2015:3,5).

Remarkably, the same pain-awakening effect has been observed in a thirty-nine-year-old woman with congenital insensitivity to pain (Minett et al. 2015:5,7,8). When she was given this combination of $Na_v1.7$ channel blockers and opioid antagonists, she felt pain for the first time in her life, even reporting general pain in a leg that had been fractured on several occasions in the past (Minett et al. 2015:5,7).

On the basis of their observations, the authors of this study suggest that chronic pain conditions be treated with $Na_v1.7$ channel blockers in combination with opioid drugs

(Minett et al. 2015:7). What is more, the authors note that this treatment schedule is likely to have few side effects (Minett et al. 2015:7). This study thus genuinely demonstrates that humanity might finally break free from being under the command of the problematic phenomenon of pain.

I do not mean to claim that pain does not serve a valuable instrumental purpose (to current humans), nor do I wish to downplay the dangers faced by children born without the ability to feel pain. I merely invoke the example of congenital insensitivity to pain to illustrate the point that there exists the genuine potential to bring about such states via genetic engineering or, as the above study suggests, (merely) via pharmaceutical interventions. Further, though I am otherwise sympathetic to his claims, I nevertheless fear that Trisel underestimates the amount of suffering there is in the world, and that he is too quick to dismiss the potential of human enhancement technologies to radically reduce this suffering. For one, the availability of the $Na_v1.7$ channel blocker and opioid antagonist combination suggested above would go a great way toward making the world less threatening place, at least by removing the spectre of chronic pain.

And as one last challenge to Trisel's reply about pain having instrumental value, I will note that pain often lingers some time after it has done its job of alerting us to damage.[165] Further, as the case of those born with congenital insensitivity to pain highlights, it is possible to learn that one ought not to engage in certain activities, take certain risks, even without pain as part of the feedback loop. To be sure, congenital insensitivity to pain also highlights the dangers of not feeling pain, particularly in

[165] I expand on similar thoughts regarding the problem of pain in Chapter 11.

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early childhood. But those with the condition who enter into adulthood have by then learnt to better manage their lives.

One of my close friends has a very high threshold for pain. As a child, she tore a muscle dancing in ballet class, but kept going to lessons for many days afterward before her mother spotted the swelling and bruising that had formed around her hip. As a result of such childhood experiences, she is very careful not to injure herself. She shouts "ow!" whenever, say, she bumps her knee into a piece of furniture or burns her finger, even though it almost never hurts, and she lets others know (doctors, for example) to be careful around her, owing to her decreased capacity to feel pain. Despite not being able to feel pain easily, she is very motivated to stay healthy and injury free. And she is upset when others fail to take due care in physical interactions with her—not as a semi-voluntary reaction to being in pain, but because she values her well-being.

10.3. Transhumanism: an overview and review of its significance for anti-natalism

Philosophers who advocate the view known as transhumanism argue, among other things, for the use of technology (More 2013) and applied reason (More 1990) to alter the human (biological) condition so that we may become "beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have" (Bostrom 2004:493). The eventual elimination of (unnecessary) human suffering is one of the primary aims of

transhumanism (Bostrom 2003:3). And so it is with anti-natalism![166] However, for the transhumanist, one catastrophe must be avoided "at any cost", namely *extinction* (Bostrom 2003:10).

This, of course, is of particular relevance to the natal debate vis-à-vis Benatar. Benatar (2012:146) himself acknowledges that

> by itself, the asymmetry argument is insufficient to yield the anti-natalist conclusion. It shows that it is better never to come into existence. It does not show how great a harm it is to come into existence.[167]

Some transhumanists (e.g., Pearce 2007) believe that pain and suffering can and should be *completely* eradicated from the human condition, by genetically altering our DNA so that we are no longer "human"—according to our current understanding of this term, at least. They believe that we should embrace technological advancements that might help us achieve this goal of transcending, as it were, our current human vulnerabilities and limitations. According to the transhumanist organisation "Humanity+" (formerly known as "the World Transhumanist Association"), "the human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase" (Humanity+ FAQ 2015).

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[166] Note, though, that Harrison and Tanner (2012) offer several arguments for anti-natalism, including one motivated by the fact that human activity leads to untold suffering for *other* species. According to this line of argument, it would be better for other species if *we* went extinct.
[167] Though he would argue that procreation would still be morally wrong, to a degree.

All of this relates to anti-natalism, and specifically Benatar's anti-natalism, in the following way: One can be right about saying that existence for human beings is a "net harm" (Benatar 2006:1), but it needn't involve *as bad a harm*—at least, it needn't contain *as high a degree of pain and suffering*—as it typically does today. Moreover, there is an arguably possible world where human beings (or "transhumans"—or, eventually, "posthumans") do not need to feel *any* pain and suffering, but still enjoy the benefits of human existence—perhaps even to an amplified level.

Emerging research into the phenomenon of pain (for example, Reimann et al. 2010; Waxman 2010) is giving us new insights into how we can potentially manipulate our ability to feel pain. Plausibly, creation could one day be like bringing beings into something akin to heaven or the garden of Eden, not "a world of suffering" (Benatar 2006:88). Creation could thus potentially be more like a "pure benefit" (Shiffrin 1999:124) than a "net harm" (Benatar 2006:1). Crucially, depending on the degree of genetic alteration involved, neither Benatar's extreme nor moderate argument would arguably apply to the creation of such "transhuman" beings.

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I suggest that an anti-natalist ought to welcome any enhancements that will lead to people leading better lives. However, this need not entail supporting enhancement as a substitute for extinction, as an anti-natalist might not be optimistic about the possibility of minimising the harms of human existence to negligible levels. Further, he might deny that we have a duty to procreate, regardless of whether this involves the procreation of humans or transhumans—though I have argued that we do in fact

have a duty to prevent human beings (or, at the very least, beings who care about human values) from going extinct, and will not be reviewing these arguments here just yet.

In any event, so far as I can tell, there is nothing inherent to the anti-natalist viewpoint that is in direct opposition to human enhancement—a thought I later explore in this final part of my thesis. Thus, my primary goal, as I see it, is to convince the reader that transhumanism offers a practical challenge to the anti-natalist's views. But I must first deal with transhumanism's many critics, a task I undertake in the next chapter.

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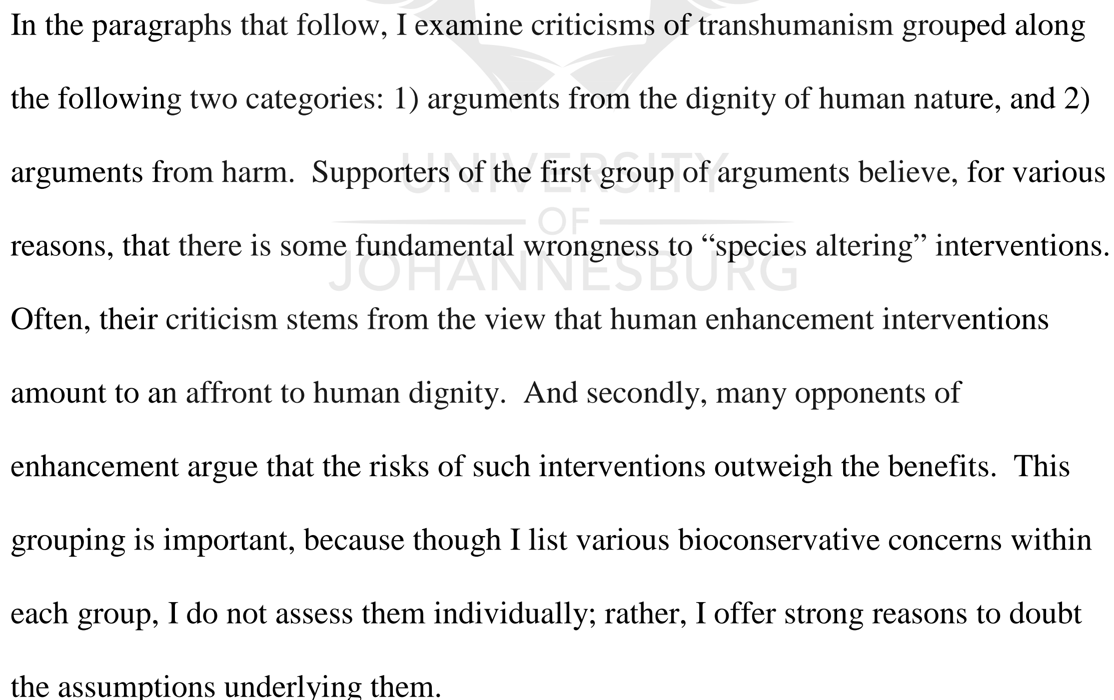
11. Objections to transhumanism

Of course, the views of transhumanists are, similarly to the views of anti-natalists, bound to attract criticism. Notoriously, for example, Francis Fukuyama (2004) has nominated transhumanism as "the world's most dangerous idea" due to what he perceives are its threats to human dignity and equality. I address moral criticisms of the transhumanism, though I cannot offer a full defence of the view here (nor do I need to). My more limited aim is to offer strong reasons to believe that the transhumanist project is nomologically possible one, and that it offers a firm challenge to the view that procreate will always result in serious harm.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In the paragraphs that follow, I examine criticisms of transhumanism grouped along the following two categories: 1) arguments from the dignity of human nature, and 2) arguments from harm. Supporters of the first group of arguments believe, for various reasons, that there is some fundamental wrongness to "species altering" interventions. Often, their criticism stems from the view that human enhancement interventions amount to an affront to human dignity. And secondly, many opponents of enhancement argue that the risks of such interventions outweigh the benefits. This grouping is important, because though I list various bioconservative concerns within each group, I do not assess them individually; rather, I offer strong reasons to doubt the assumptions underlying them.

I should note that this is not the only way to group objections to human enhancement (for alternatives, see DeGrazia 2005ba and Hall 2012), and there might be some degree of overlap between them. However, my task, as I see it, is not primarily to offer a thorough and complete response to the most common objections to human enhancement. Rather, my task is to select the objections that are most relevant to anti-natalism, and to provide responses to them that demonstrate to the anti-natalist why he should not dismiss transhumanism as a (more morally tenable) solution to the problem of human suffering. I should also note that, since modern anti-natalism is a secular school of thought,[168] and as this chapter examines anti-natalism from the secular outlook of the transhumanist, I will not focus on the growing number of commentaries of transhumanism from Christian theologians and ethicists.[169]

In keeping with convention, I refer to opponents of human enhancement, such as Fukuyama (and Leon Kass and Michael Sandel), as "bioconservatives". Opponents of bioconservatism, in turn, need not be straightforwardly "pro-enhancement" in their outlook; many of them might more accurately be characterised as holding "anti-anti-enhancement" views (Buchanan 2011:13). Accordingly, in forwarding responses to bioconservatism, I argue that anti-natalists are (or ought to be), at the very least, anti-anti-enhancement in their outlook.

[168] Note, however, that anti-natal thoughts are not uncommon in religious texts. For example, *Ecclesiastes* (1:1-18) of the Hebrew Bible bemoans the apparent meaninglessness and futility of existence—a state of affairs with which any number of generations of humans must cope.
[169] For a recent and thoughtful set of responses to transhumanism from a Christian perspective, consider the essays in: Cole-Turner, R. (ed.) 2011. *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*. Georgetown University Press: Washington.

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11.1. Arguments from the dignity of human nature

Perhaps the most common type of objection to human enhancement stems from a belief that is morally wrong, or at the very least morally problematic, to irreversibly alter human nature. I use the phrase "the dignity of human nature" because, so far as I can tell, most bioconservatives who argue that we should not genetically alter certain core human features are motivated by some conception of human dignity, or the idea that life has some kind of sacred value that places limits on tinkering with our biology. But this is not always made explicit. Instead, here are two popular reasons why bioconservatives think that we ought not to alter human nature. I briefly outline them here, more closely in the two sections that follow. First, there is a concern that altered humans will no longer be members of the genus *Homo sapiens*, and that this would be a threat to our sense of a moral community. Thus, opponents of genetic engineering caution against altering the human genome, as they take it to symbolise the common heritage of humanity.

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A second concern about the desire to alter the human genome stems from worries about what this desire reveals about our values. Critics of human enhancement view attempts to alter human nature as either hubristic, lacking in humility, or otherwise paying inadequate respect to some valuable aspect of human nature.[170] To Michael Sandel, for example, an "openness to the unbidden" (2009:80) is a human value we ought to protect, and any attempts to take control of nature ought to be viewed as an inappropriate "habit of mind and way of being" (2007:96). Similarly, in a section

[170] A third concern is that enhancement poses a threat to personal identity (DeGrazia 2005b).

entitled "Hubris or Humility: Respect for 'the Given'," the President's Council on Bioethics appeals to "a *human* 'givenness,' or a given humanness, that is also good and worth respecting" (2003:289). And, motivated by similar concerns, Leon Kass (2003) warns us of the "dehumanising" potential of human enhancement.[171]

11.1.1. Transhumanism as a threat to species membership

A number of critics of human enhancement have attempted to campaign for limitations on genetic research. These attempts have stemmed from a desire to preserve the integrity of the species. And so, for example, UNESCO's *Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights* aims to restrict genetic research, warning that the human genome "underlies the fundamental unity of all members of the human family" (UNESCO 1997:3).[172] As can be seen, "human family" here is equated with "the species-typical characteristics shared by all human beings qua human beings" (Fukuyama 2002:101). In other words, what it means to be a member of "the human family" is defined taxonomically. That is to say, having (unaltered) human biology is what makes one human, according to this view.

Human rights lawyer George Annas has, together with Lori Andrews and Rosario Isasi, argued for a new UN "Convention on the Preservation of the Human Species", the aim of which is to lead to an international treaty to ban potentially "species

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[171] These anti-enhancement "argument[s] from meaning" (Agar 2004:61), which I recast here as arguments from value, have important parallels to the pro-enhancement ones I forward later, as both sets of arguments proceed from a desire to preserve what humans value most.
[172] Though, somewhat paradoxically, this document also states that "[t]he application of research [...] concerning the human genome, shall seek to offer relief from suffering and improve the health of individuals and humankind as a whole" (UNESCO 1997:5).

altering" research (Annas et al. 2002:153). To Annas and his colleagues, genetic interventions of the sort proposed by transhumanism represent a sort of crime against humanity. In particular, Annas et al. have in mind the idea that, through cloning and inheritable genetic alterations, a new species or subspecies of humans would emerge (Annas, et al. 2002:161). On the face of it, this seems (to me, at least), to be a dignity-based objection, but Annas et al. base their criticism of genetic interventions on the belief that

> [m]embership in the human species is central to the meaning and enforcement of human rights, and respect for basic human rights is essential for the survival of the human species. (Annas et al. 2002:153)

The possibility that genetic engineering will result in the creation of a new subspecies—of enhanced humans (versus the "merely natural")—is also a concern Sandel (2007:15) expresses. Part of the concern here stems from the human race's history of violence and discrimination based along ethnic, racial, or tribal (etc.) lines. But, as I discuss in §12.2, this concern might be overstated if we factor in the possibility of genetic interventions that can foster moral enhancement.

11.1.2. Transhumanism as a threat to fundamental human values

On some bioconservative accounts, enhancement is representative of undesirable human traits, such as hubris or a lack of humility (The Presidents Council 2003; Sandel 2004, 2007). On other accounts, enhancement threatens to destroy valuable

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aspects of human character, such as a respect for the "unbidden" aspects of nature (Sandel 2007). The concern here is that enhancement might "give us what we say we want, but only in a form purged of its proper human significance" (Agar 2004:61).

To Michael Sandel, the problem with human enhancement is that it represents a kind of "hyperagency—a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires" (Sandel 2007:26-27). Sandel argues that as a result of this "drive to mastery" (2007:27), we lose our "openness to the unbidden" (2007:45), and that we thereby risk destroying "an appreciation of the gifted character of human powers and achievements" (2007:27). By neglecting to fully appreciate this "giftedness", we fail to acknowledge that our abilities are "not wholly our own doing, nor even fully ours" (Sandel 2007:27).

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Many bioconservatives warn that genetically altering humans would amount to a sort of "dehumanisation". This dehumanisation can, for example, take the form of a removal of core human traits. Francis Fukuyama has this in mind when he argues that human enhancement threatens to destroy what he calls "Factor X". This is "the essential human quality" that is left behind when "we strip away all of a person's contingent and accidental characteristics" (Fukuyama 2002:149). It is hard to tell exactly when or which of our enhancement interventions will damage or annihilate Factor X, and thus the essence of humanity, and this is why transhumanism is "the world's most dangerous idea" (Fukuyama 2004).

Many people feel a deep unease about genetically engineered humans. Kass refers to this emotional response in the title of his well-known article, "The wisdom of repugnance" (1997). Kass believes that repugnance is often the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it (1997:20). He notes that many laypeople are repulsed by the prospect of human cloning, and he advises us not to dismiss such reactions. To Kass, something is lost when natural processes like human reproduction give way to artificial means like cloning, as there is something "profound" about "the traditional method of reproduction" (a phrase Kass advises us against adopting) (1997:21). Sexual reproduction is not derived from culture or tradition; rather, it is established by nature (Kass 1997:21). Subsequently, "[the ethical judgement on cloning] must be regarded primarily as a matter of meaning: Is cloning a fulfilment of human begetting and belonging?" (Kass 1997:21).

Annas argues against the "dehumanising" technologies of cloning and inheritable genetic alterations, which would "require massive dangerous and unethical human experimentation" (Annas et al. 2002:161).[173] A further worry of his is that cloning technologies will restrict or violate what Joel Feinberg terms a child's "right to an open future" (Feinberg 1980:124), or lead to "a new eugenics movement for 'designer children'" (Annas et al. 2002:161).

11.2. Responses to the friend of the dignity of human nature

[173] In order to illustrate what they mean by this, the authors refer the reader to "Nazi doctors" (Annas et al. 2002:161n32).

A number of critics have objected to a bioconservative conclusion that stems from a perceived duty to preserve human nature. In this section, I first discuss the arguments of these pro- and anti-anti-enhancement critics, as well as forward my own objections to the friend of human nature's views. I follow this up by looking at the transhumanist and bioconservative issues regarding human nature in light of anti-natalism, which, as I have been arguing, calls for a revision of some of our deepest values.

Criticisms of the friend of human nature's views can be summarised as follows. First, he provides no reasons for his bias toward preserving the human genome. Second, he makes factual errors regarding the human genome, its role in human nature and species membership, and oversimplifies its relation to human rights. Third, he underappreciates the importance of weighing up the supposed duty to preserve human nature (however one might understand this duty), on the one hand, with the problem of human suffering, on the other. Below, I examine each of these three groups of objections in greater detail.

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11.2.1. No rational reasons for a bias toward preserving the human genome

Critics of bioconservative views highlight that no good reasons are provided for this bias toward preserving the human genome, and thus the status quo. Our genetic composition is the result of evolutionary compromises, some of them quite unfortunate. John Harris, for example, points out that we have no real reason to believe that our genetic heritage, which is the result of evolutionary processes, has endowed us with a state that cannot be improved upon, nor that evolution will not

eventually make things worse for humans (2009:133). And even an opponent of radical enhancement, Nicholas Agar, objects to Fukuyama's apparent appeals to nature, questioning why "merely remaining human is some manner of moral achievement" (Agar 2004:91).

Other critics are even less kind. Frustrated by the quality of debates around these matters, Allan Buchanan regards much of the criticisms of enhancement to consist of "[m]urky rhetoric masquerading as argument" (2011:2). In response to "articulate, fair, and powerful criticism", he asserts that bioconservatives often respond merely with "grand-sounding, but deeply ambiguous catchphrases and slogans" (Buchanan 2011:3).

11.2.2. Factual errors regarding the human genome, its role in human nature and species membership, and an oversimplification of its relation to human rights

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The idea that genetic engineering is an intrinsic threat to human rights, and that it thus ought to be restricted, might have more purchase if one believed that moral status arises solely or importantly from being a member of the human species. But this taxonomical basis for possessing moral status, and thus rights, is highly contested. Other, less procrustean candidates for moral status include having the ability to reason (Beauchamp & Childress 2009:68), the ability to feel pain (Fenton 2008:4), or having future-oriented preferences (Singer 2011:80). Merely being taxonomically human is not enough to enjoy human rights—or else a human corpse would enjoy rights (Juengst 2009:52). The bioconservative's taxonomy based view of human rights can

thus seem to amount to a sort of "moral idolatry" of the human genome (Juengst 2009:52).

Though bioconservatives such as Annas (2001) warn that enhanced humans might come to view unenhanced humans as inferior and subsequently treat them poorly, it strikes me that the opposite is at least as probable. Improvements in human intelligence will likely lead to greater sensitivity toward less fortunate beings. We can see this when we look at how improvements in education—a method of altering us phenotypically as opposed to genetically—have led to us including many non-human animals into our moral circle.

But there is yet a deeper factual problem with the view that cloning and inheritable genetic conditions are "dehumanising" interventions that would create new species or subspecies. DeGrazia (2005:278) rejects the notion that creating or transforming an individual into another species would make the resulting individual nonhuman.[174] This is because the resulting individual "would presumably be a hominid even if not *Homo sapiens*", and "[m]aybe all hominids, or at least some hominids in addition to *Homo sapiens*, are properly regarded as human" (DeGrazia 2005b:278).

Further, since this individual would have human parents, and it could be argued that species membership is determined by that of one's biological parents, it is debatable whether this individual could be classified as a member of a new species (DeGrazia 2005b:278). Even if this individual were unable to reproduce with unaltered humans,

[174] This accords with my intuitions regarding the permissibility of avoiding extinction by transforming our species into a better species. I would argue that this transformation would not extinguish "human" dignity, because the dignity of transhumans could have the same basis—namely, the capacity to care for the same intrinsic values (though perhaps more consistently and fittingly).

she “would still be ‘human’ in any sense that might be normatively important” (DeGrazia 2005b:278-9).

Admittedly, DeGrazia does not explicit outline what he means here. As I read him, being human in the “normatively important” sense goes beyond merely being a hominid or an offspring of parents who are both *Homo sapiens*. Rather, it may have more to do with certain values or core traits that are central being human.

As a further reason to doubt the bioconservative position on the human genome vis-à-vis species membership and human rights, it is not clear that the injunction to preserve the human genome is at all coherent. For one, the human genome is naturally subject to alteration. Eric Juengst (2009) points out that species “are not static collections of organisms that can be ‘preserved’ against change like a can of fruit”; rather, they “wax and wane with every birth and death and their genetic complexions shift across time and space” (Juengst 2009:50). In addition, due to natural selection, our descendants millions of years into the future are unlikely to be anything like us, and thus “what genetic engineering threatens [to destroy now] is probably doomed anyway” (Glover 1984:36). If “preserving the human genome” means “not purposefully trying to alter the human genome”, then the only guaranteed way to avoid such alteration would be to utilise non-traditional reproductive methods, namely cloning (Juengst 2009:51; Harris 2009:135). This is because, apart from monozygotic twinning, procreation always alters the human genome (Harris 2009:134-5).

What is more, our genes interact with the environment; both factors (genes and environment) exert a crucial influence upon our final characteristics. Consider the

fact that despite having been born with the genetic potential to acquire languages, this would have amounted to nothing had we been lost as babies and raised by baboons (DeGrazia 2005b:274). There seems to be no support for the bioconservative's assumption that our genome is more essential than the interaction between our genome and the environment (Buchanan, Brock, Daniels, & Wikler 2000:160).

And the issue is yet more complicated than this. We are not just composed of human cells, but of microbial cells, which outnumber our human cells ten to one (Juengst 2009:52). Interactions between human cells and bacterial cells might occur even at the genetic level (Juengst 2009:52; Hooper, et al. 2001). To those who would argue that the human genome serves as the basis of human rights, the fact of our "super-organismic" nature complicates the view that "a canonical set of 'human genes' will [ever] be available as a ground for human rights" (Juengst 2009:53).

Also, even if we accept that we have, in some meaningful sense, a duty to preserve the human genome, the expression of such a duty could take multiple routes. For example, it could merely require that we refrain from genetic engineering, whilst accepting the alterations to the human genome that occur naturally. Or, it could entail us actively attempting to preserve our genetic *heritage*, which is a wider category that may or may not include injunctions against purposefully altering the human *genome*. In terms of this former phenotypical category, we could emphasise the importance of preserving historical artefacts created by our ancestors, such as languages like Latin, or pre-historic cave paintings. Presumably, we would not want items in the latter category to be extinguished at the expense of attempting to (merely) preserve the human genome.

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11.2.3. Neglecting to thoroughly weigh up the supposed duty to preserve human nature with the problem of human suffering

It strikes me that the bioconservative does an incomplete job of weighing up our perceived duty to preserve human nature with the negative aspects of human nature. This is evident not just in the bioconservative's (over)emphasis on the dangers of enhancement, but also in his underappreciation of the problem of suffering, and thus the potential for improving the human condition. For example, in considering the potential of genetic engineering to improve human lives, Trisel makes the debatable claim, as we have seen, that "[f]uture persons could not have a much higher quality of life than a person of today who has a high quality life" (2012:90). Not only is this surely too quick a dismissal of the potential of human enhancement, it also fails to take into account the fact that a significant majority of people today could not be said to enjoy lives that meet this standard, nor the possibility that this gap could be bridged via enhancement technologies. For example, cognitive enhancements could help us better address such problems on a global scale—a thought I will return to in a moment.

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It may also be the case that our best chance of preserving our genetic heritage might be to modify ourselves to better avoid existential risk—risks that threaten to possibly render intelligent life extinct (Bostrom 2002). We can now, in some meaningful sense, preserve the genetic history of our long-dead humanoid cousins. Crucially, we are able to do this because we avoided existential risk better than they did.[175]

[175] Note, also, that in a trans- or posthuman future, the capacity to produce humans as we now know them might still be available (albeit not via traditional procreative means). That is to say, modified humans might still retain the capacity to make "regular" humans, and our transhuman successors might thus serve as future caretakers of the human genome, as we currently know it.

On this note, though, many people worry that the march of scientific progress, if left untempered, might lead to our extinction. The decision to use nuclear power to create atomic bombs is a salient example here. Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu (2008) express concern over the possibility of morally corrupt persons using cognitive enhancement technologies toward evil ends. Though Persson and Savulescu also believe that cognitive enhancement could lead to moral progress, and that this moral progress is essential for the survival of our species, they are worried that the benefits of cognitive enhancement are not outweighed by the risks.

In response, Elizabeth Fenton argues that Persson and Savulescu make the common mistake of "setting up a false dichotomy—individuals versus society—[that overlooks] the potential *social* benefits of enhancement" (Fenton 2010:150, my emphasis). As an example of one of these social benefits, Fenton suggests that "non-traditional cognitive enhancement" might help by "generating" smarter scientists who might help tackle human-made climate change (Fenton 2010:150). On Fenton's view, the social benefits of enhancement are often overlooked (the benefits of enhancement are usually seen to accrue to *individuals*), while the societal dangers of enhancement are often overplayed (the risks of enhancement are seen to affect *society* as a whole). A more balanced view would reveal to us that there are more significant costs to *not* enhancing (Fenton 2010:150).

And so, to return to Trisel's dismissal of the potential of enhancement technologies to further improve human lives, even if people with the highest quality lives today have indeed reached some optimum welfare threshold, it is far from the case that all people currently enjoy such levels of welfare. Indeed, it is clear to me that, throughout

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human history, lives of the highest quality have been underwritten by the underpaid—and in many cases, unpaid—labour of a significant majority of the world's people. To remind the reader of two modern day examples I have already appealed to in this thesis, consider, first, the smartphones and other electronic devices that make "our" lives so much easier are often produced by people under soul-crushing working conditions.[176] And second, recall that there is some evidence to suggest that chocolate—one of life's greatest pleasures—is often produced using child slavery.[177]

With these two examples of human wickedness in mind, consider my suggestion that these are not merely the aberrations but some of the signature failings of human nature. Through education, laws, customs, and child-rearing practices—methods of altering ourselves phenotypically—we have attempted, throughout history, to deal with these failings. Yet many people around the world suffer needlessly—often in great part due to, we constantly lament, the cognitive and moral failures of their leaders.[178] Genetic enhancement technologies might help address the challenge of making the world a fairer, more peaceful place—perhaps by directly (that is, genetically) helping to bring about much needed and long overdue changes in human nature.

And as a final reason for dismissing calls to preserve human nature: *philosophy* might demand that we embrace (cognitive) enhancement. Bostrom says it well:

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[176] See: Suicides at Foxconn: light and death (2010).
[177] See: Fernandez (2015), and Faber et al. (2010).
[178] One might respond by saying that this is possible without biological tinkering. Indeed, it is, theoretically; but in practice, a resurrected Plato would look at our modern democracies and note that we have yet to make adequate adjustments for the dark side of human nature.

> [O]ur human brains may cap our ability to discover philosophical and scientific truths. It is possible that failure of philosophical research to arrive at solid, generally accepted answers to many of the traditional big philosophical questions could be due to the fact that we are not smart enough to be successful in this kind of enquiry. Our cognitive limitations may be confining us in a Platonic cave, where the best we can do is theorize about "shadows," that is, representations that are sufficiently oversimplified and dumbed-down to fit inside a human brain. (Bostrom 2005:6)

Whatever we make of Bostrom's speculations, it is not unreasonable to think that improvements to human cognition might help us find lasting solutions to problems that we as a species have long endured. Some of these problems seem unsurmountable, and have led people, throughout history, to an anti-natal conclusion.

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11.2.4. A plausible anti-natal response to the friend of human nature

Would an anti-natalist object to altering the human genome, and thus human nature? I would suggest not, for it seems to me that a deep dissatisfaction with the way we are physically (and psychically) constructed is at the heart of many anti-natal intuitions. Unlike the bio-conservative, the anti-natalist does not appear to be a friend of the status quo. Benatar goes to some length to persuade us that this is in fact "a world of suffering" (2006:88-92), listing such unfortunate components of the human condition as natural disasters, hunger and malnutrition, disease, the various injuries we inflict

upon others (murder, rape, etc.),[179] as well as those we inflict upon ourselves (suicide). This is in response to defendants of the status quo, usually "optimists", who "make valiant attempts to paint a rosy picture, to put a redeeming positive gloss on the human predicament" (Benatar 2006:88).

Furthermore, as I suggested above, the transhumanist might engage more thoroughly in a process of weighing up the risks of enhancement versus the benefits; it strikes me that the anti-natalist, too, would be more open to such a weighing up process. For one thing, both the anti-natalist and transhumanist would soberly remind us that our bodies are vulnerable to countless injuries and harms, and capable of producing feeling intense, prolonged pain. Often, this pain lingers long after it has served its purpose of notifying us of damage to our body, or, in the case of phantom limb pain, long after the damaged part of our body has been removed.

Indeed, pain is often gratuitous in another sense: its intensity often far exceeds the injuries to which it is intended to alert us. For example, I can think of no good reason for why accidentally bumping my "funny bones" against the edges of tables, chairs, etc. (which happens far too often) ought to elicit pain of the severity that it does. Relatedly, to the best of our knowledge, the reason why even the slightest shock to a pair of human testicles produces the kind of agonising pain that it does, is that nature has deemed an extreme pain response to be the best way to (motivate us to) protect human testicles from injury (Gallup 2009:523).[180] Such an adaptation, though

[179] Presumably, Benatar would also place creation in this list!

[180] Testicles in human males hang exposed and unprotected outside their owners' bodies. They are situated externally, and not internally (as they are in elephants, for example), because human sperm is most viable when testicle temperatures are kept 2 – 3°C below body temperature (Setchell 1998). In addition, during intercourse, the slightly higher temperature of the vagina serves to "activate" these viable sperm (Gallup 2009). The testicles have evolved a rather impressive method of maintaining

effective, is nonetheless evidence of the brutality of natural selection. Indeed, Bostrom possibly has such brutality in mind when he says that "[h]ad Mother Nature been a real parent, she would have been in jail for child abuse and murder" (2005:211).

Our bodies are also very vulnerable to radiation and extreme temperature changes; we are able to survive only within a very narrow (relative to other life forms) environmental range. Of course, we get around our temperature sensitivity by the uniquely human technology that is clothing. In addition, we are able to construct sophisticated dwellings that shelter us from harsh environmental conditions, as well as other uniquely human climate-control inventions such as air-conditioning and heaters. But this should not distract us from the fact that, unaugmented by these technologies, our fragility to environmental changes is often tragically apparent. Heatwaves regularly kill hundreds, sometimes thousands, and it is not uncommon, even in the West, for people to freeze to death during winter.[181]

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In terms of our psychological makeup, recall from my discussion near the start of this thesis that the anti-natalist philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Peter Wessel Zapffe, along with the novelist Thomas Hardy, have all expressed some version of the

optimum temperature levels, with each testicle possessing the ability to move independently either away (to decrease temperature) or further toward (to increase temperature) its owner's body. Yet, despite the fact that they are essential to the propagation of their owner's genetic code, testicles have not evolved a protective sheath of any kind (presumably, this would adversely affect temperature regulation). All that "protects" them is severe pain, or, to be more accurate, the *threat* of severe pain, which (rather successfully) motivates its owners to avoid shocks to this region (Gallup 2009:523). My point, of course, is that this is a rather unfortunate, yet revealing, evolutionary compromise.

[181] An obvious example here would be homeless people who unable to find adequate shelter during winter. However, even those who have a place to live are in danger. For example, every year in the UK, tens of thousands of pensioners die due to being unable to afford to properly heat their homes during the winter months (Ward 2015).

view that human nature is fatally flawed.[182] To Hardy, we have evolved to a point where we are too intelligent to enjoy the human condition—we are too smart for our own good: "We have reached a degree of intelligence which Nature never contemplated when framing her laws, and for which she consequently has provided no adequate satisfactions" (Hardy in Matz 2014:16). As Aaron Matz argues (2014), such thoughts led Hardy not just to explore anti-natalist themes in his novels, but possibly also to a personal decision to remain child-free for life. And recall that Zapffe, too, believed that our intelligence was a great source of angst. Our overdeveloped intellects mean that we have become "a species […] armed too heavily", "a biological paradox, an abomination, an absurdity, an exaggeration of disastrous nature" (Zapffe 2004).

I should note that such concerns about our flawed natures are echoed in the writings of transhumanists. But while the likes of Schopenhauer, Zapffe, and Hardy find themselves inexorably led toward an anti-natal conclusion, transhumanists, perhaps buoyed by a techno-optimism inconceivable to their nineteenth and twentieth century forbears, are decidedly more hopeful in their outlook. Consider, for example, the following mixture of pessimism about human nature and optimism about the future.

On his way to talking about the changes to come, Ray Kurzweil laments the frailty of "[o]ur version 1.0 biological bodies", which are "subject to a myriad of failure modes", and which demand "cumbersome maintenance rituals" (2005:17). The human mind, too, disappoints, for "[w]hile human intelligence is sometimes capable of soaring in its creativity and expressiveness, much human thought is derivative,

[182] Tragically, reasons for suicide often have more to do with emotional anguish than physical pain.

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petty, and circumscribed" (Kurzweil 2005:17). But where his anti-natalist forebears would have resigned themselves to a gloomy view of the future, the transhumanist Kurzweil defiantly declares that technology

> […] will allow us to transcend these limitations of our biological bodies and brains. We will gain power over our fates. Our mortality will be in our own hands. We will be able to live as long as we want (a subtly different statement from saying we will live forever). We will fully understand human thinking and will vastly extend and expand its reach. (Kurzweil 2005:17)

Attempts to alter human nature are nothing new. We have, in some sense, been wilfully altering and augmenting ourselves for millennia. We drink alcohol to ease social anxiety and loneliness, caffeine to improve focus and productivity, and smoke tobacco to relieve stress and ease tension. Indeed, this drive toward using technology to gain a greater degree of control over our environment is one of the most quintessentially "human" aspects of human nature. Arthur Caplan (Caplan), in contrast to the bioconservative, argues that our ongoing "creative manipulation of our environment, including our own bodies and minds, [is no less worthy] of inclusion as part of human 'nature'" (2009:202). And Françoise Baylis and Jason Scott Robert (2004) argue that enhancement is a part of our "destiny" as a species: "the time has come for humans to shape our own destiny and to direct the course of evolution" (2004:23). We finally have tools powerful enough to do this in genetic enhancement technologies (Baylis & Robert 2004:23).

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11.3. Arguments from harm

There is another important set of bioconservative objections to which the transhumanist friend of procreation must respond. These objections are motivated by concerns over the potentially harmful effects of the human enhancement interventions that will supposedly help bring about a transhuman future. Anti-natalists, in particular, ought to be concerned about the possibility of significant harm arising on the way toward this posited transhuman future.[183] This is because the last thing an anti-natalist wants is for more suffering to be added to the human condition!

In the following paragraphs, I outline objections to the transhumanist project that stem from the view that such a project would pose an unreasonable risk of harm to individuals, or to society in general. I take care to show how these risks can be understood in light of anti-natalism, which I have argued is (primarily) a welfarist moral position. I then offer pro-enhancement responses to these objections from the literature on this debate.

11.3.1. Transhumanism as potentially harmful to individuals

The transhumanist project, recall, promotes the use of technology, specifically human enhancement technologies, to radically improve the human condition. This goes beyond such technologies as pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD)—

[183] Note again, though, that Benatar thinks limited procreation is permissible within a voluntary phased extinction. This is to say, it is permissible to impose the harms of creation within the limited conditions of this project. As I suggest later, Benatar and other anti-natalists ought to be open to the idea of imposing the harms of creation (albeit a different sort of creation) within another project, namely the transhumanist project.

transhumanists believe that we ought to eventually create children with capabilities outside of the current range of human potential, such as supernormal intelligence and memory. While, from a purely welfarist perspective, one ought to welcome technology that, say, allows prospective parents to select against certain congenital disorders, any future attempts to produce proto-transhuman "designer babies"[184] carries its own risks.

Ordinary procreation of course carries risks to potential children. Anti-natalists consider these risks to be unreasonable. Of course, I am here referring to intuitions motivating the second, weaker formulation of Benatar's anti-natalism, namely that a typical life contains far too many serious harms for procreation to be judged permissible. But what would an anti-natalist motivated by such intuitions make of the application of human enhancement technologies to procreation—interventions that aim at radically reducing the pain and suffering for future generations? I think that an anti-natalist would be wary of such interventions, and would need assurance that the risks these interventions pose are not too unreasonable. Here are a couple of risks human enhancement poses to individuals, risks that need addressing in order for an anti-natalist to buy into the idea that transhumanism might in fact seriously challenge his views.

First, many bioconservatives argue that the risks of human enhancement are too great because we simply do not know what sort of unforeseen consequences our genetic interventions will have upon those we intend to benefit. For one thing, many genes influence more than one trait—that is, they are *pleiotropic* (The President's Council

[184] Perhaps with such enhanced traits as radically higher pain thresholds.

on Bioethics 2003:39). One of the most discussed examples of pleiotropy involves the relationship between sickle-cell disease and malaria. A genetic variation in haemoglobin both causes sickle-cell disease and offers protection from malaria (Allison 1954; Ferreira, et al. 2011). The phenomenon of pleiotropy thus highlights the danger that attempts to benefit via genetic manipulation could inadvertently result in harm.

A further complication is that many human traits tend to be *polygenic*, meaning that if we desired to, for example, increase the intelligence of a potential child, we would need to manipulate multiple genes (Agar 2004:29; The President's Council on Bioethics 2003:38). To give another example, many would-be parents might want to give their children the added advantage of height. But this, too, is no straightforward matter, as height is a trait that is influenced by around 93000 genetic variations (Goldstein 2009:1696).

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Though the preceding examples of human enhancement interventions aim at bestowing benefits and not, strictly speaking, avoiding harms, the bioconservative's point is clear: genetic engineering might significantly harm individuals in unforeseen ways, and thus ought not to be attempted. This is of significance to an anti-natalist, because it suggests that attempts to benefit children by creating them with germ-line modifications[185] might represent, at least in some cases, an even greater risk than ordinary procreation. Indeed, there is even the risk of burdening children with harms that go beyond those encountered in a typical life. A further complication arises from

[185] Germ-line gene therapy can be contrasted with somatic cell therapy. The former type of intervention targets the sperm or egg cells, and modifications can be passed onto one's offspring. The latter targets specific (non-reproductive) cells in a patient's body, and is not passed onto one's offspring.

the fact that the children of persons with these genetic "enhancements" would inherit these potentially maladaptive traits.[186] Here, an anti-natalist might argue that the risk of (supranormal) inter-generational harm with "enhanced procreation", as it were, could render such acts of bringing-into-being even more morally problematic than ordinary procreation.

11.3.2. Transhumanism as adding to the suffering of the world

There is another set of objections levelled against transhumanism, and human enhancement in general. These objections are of relevance to anti-natalism because they suggest that human enhancement, even if successfully used to benefit individuals, could in fact amount to a net harm to the human community. Chiefly, bioconservatives warn that human enhancement could add to the amount of pain and suffering in the world by increasing inequality.

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Discrimination could result as two distinct classes emerge: the enhanced, and the unenhanced (Mehlman 1999:687; Sandel 2007:15). Thus, enhancement technologies could have the negative consequence of "widening the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'" (Baylis & Robert 2004:11), perhaps "dividing human societies into genetic nobilities jockeying biological under-classes" (Baylis & Robert 2004:15). A loss of upward social mobility might occur with radical human enhancement, with

[186] For early and influential discussions of the slippery slope argument against germ-line genetic interventions, see Juengst (1991) and Berger & Gert (1991). And, for a direct response, see Resnik (1994).

unenhanced children born to poorer families finding themselves unable to compete with wealthier, genetically enhanced children (Bostrom 2004:502).

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11.4. Responses to the arguments from harm

I first outline some pro-enhancement responses from the literature on this debate. As I approve of the sentiments they express, I will not evaluate these responses. Suffice it to say, I think that these responses successfully undercut the harm objection. I follow this by discussing ways in which the spectre of voluntary extinction ought to motivate us to adopt human enhancement as a way to resolve the impasse brought about by anti-natalism.

Friends of enhancement point out that all human decisions—and not just those about using human enhancement technology to attempt to benefit humanity—need to be made with the awareness of their potential risks (Harris 2007:33). As such, Françoise Baylis and Jason Scott Robert (2004) argue against "an outright ban" on human enhancement, advocating instead "a *cautious* stance" (2004:14; authors' emphasis) with regard to the development and use of these technologies. Relatedly, Christine Overall (2009) argues that, given the "enormous variation" between (the aims of) different enhancement technologies, "moral generalisations about all enhancement processes and technologies are unwise, and they should instead be evaluated individually" (2009:328).

Further, while we should not downplay the potential risks of human enhancement, these risks need to be weighed up against their potential benefits—especially given the significance and possible impact of those benefits. John Harris (2007), for example, argues that, in considering whether we should research into human enhancement technologies, we should not underestimate the moral importance of the fact that such technologies have as their aim "preventing serious harm or providing

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significant benefits to humankind" (2007:188). Similarly, Caplan advises that we should "take each proposed enhancement technology under consideration and decide whether what it can do is worth whatever price it might exact" (2009:208).

And, specifically as it relates to the idea that human enhancement technologies may result in inequalities, Nick Bostom (2004) argues that this is "not a sufficient reason for discouraging the development and use of [this] technology" (Bostrom 2004:503), because "[w]e must also consider its benefits, [such as] the enjoyment of health, a soaring mind, and emotional well-being" (Bostrom 2004:503). One (perhaps very optimistic) way of addressing the issue of inequality is to subsidise them or provide them free to the children of poor parents (Bostrom 2004:503). Taking this thought further, Overall (2009) argues that a more comprehensive approach to the problem of inequality would take into account the fact that, traditionally, certain groups have faced unfair disadvantages. Human enhancement technologies might then be useful to lessen or remove the disadvantages experienced specifically by these groups (Overall 2009:339).

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Though there are risks involved with human enhancement, some have argued that there may be greater risks to *not* embracing some version of transhumanism. Elizabeth Fenton (2010), for example, argues that there are "perils" to *not* embracing human enhancement. Chiefly, she argues that *moral* enhancement could hold to the key to our survival as a species. And Nick Bostrom (2003) argues that we need to pay more attention to "existential risks" – risks that threaten the very survival of our species. Such risks to our survival include irreversible environmental decay. According to Bostrom, we should therefore embrace human enhancement because it

might help us *avoid* extinction. There is, then, no choice to continue with the status quo (that is, business-as-usual procreation); embarking on a transhumanist project might be a necessary evil. Perhaps of relevance here is Stephen Hawking's view regarding our need to eventually move another planet, as Earth will not sustain human life forever.[187]

Lastly, a common assumption among friends of enhancement, one that is explicitly defended by Baylis & Robert (2004), is that the widespread adoption of human enhancement technologies is inevitable. Eric T. Juengst, for example, points out that support for human enhancement and germ-line therapy now comes from surprising sources, including "mainstream theologians, prominent molecular biologists, distinguished philosophers and senior bioethicists" (Juengst 2009:44). And though many new controversial treatments and technologies are initially met with condemnation, this early stance very often eases, eventually moving toward widespread acceptance (Baylis & Robert 2004:17). Examples include cosmetic surgery, organ transplantation and gender reassignment (Baylis & Robert 2004:18).

Of course, though, a mere appeal to the majority will not suffice as an adequate defence of human enhancement, let alone a full-blown transhumanist project. To mind, getting there requires paying attention to the possible harms and benefits of enhancement *in light of anti-natalism*. Anti-natalism, I argue in the next chapter, adds a new dimension to the enhancement debate, and the latter, in turn, challenges the anti-natalist's (pro-extinction) conclusion. Specifically, I argue that, in light of the

[187] See: http://bigthink.com/dangerous-ideas/5-stephen-hawkings-warning-abandon-earth-or-face-extinction

possibility of eradicating unnecessary pain and suffering through human enhancement technologies, we are morally required to explore this as an alternative to a thoroughgoing anti-natalism.

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12. Unpacking the caretaker argument for pro-natalism: world-regarding duties

Here is a summary of the line of argument I have been advancing. I began this thesis assuming (for the sake of argument) that anti-natalism is true: it is almost always morally impermissible, on welfarist grounds, to create new humans. However, *contra* Benatar, I have argued that there is indeed some (significant) moral badness to extinction. Further, I have argued that a voluntary human extinction project is off the table, as it were. Though I agree that human suffering is a serious problem, I have argued that voluntary extinction is not the solution, given the sorts of creatures we are (natural-born dignitarians who need to know that we will be survived by future generations).

Thus, I have offered a way to reconcile the moral badness of exposing non-consenting humans to the harms of existence with the *pro tanto* duty[188] to forestall the extinction of the human race. In other words, I have shown how we, as agents who recognise the moral seriousness of procreation, can weigh up our welfarist duties, on the one hand, with our non-welfarist duties, on the other. Here is another way to express the sort of argument I have advanced.

It is not uncommon for a would-be parent to think of procreation as a morally permissible means toward assisting her own flourishing.[189] Promoting one's own flourishing is, of course, an important self-regarding duty.[190] However, anti-natalism, focussing instead on our other-regarding duties, considers creating a child to be

[188] This remains a *pro tanto* duty until I can demonstrate that the thoroughgoing (pro-extinction) version of anti-natalism is false.
[189] Though, I think that a promising pro-natal argument could be developed from this line of reasoning, I will not pursue it here.
[190] I note that not all philosophers accept that there are self-regarding duties, or that this is one of them.

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morally impermissible—regardless of the self-regarding benefits of procreation.[191] There are, then, self-regarding duties, as well as other-regarding duties, and these can and often are in tension with each other. I suggested in my discussion on dignity that there is a third plane of duties—one consisting of *world-regarding* duties.

World-regarding duties differ from other-regarding duties, in that there needn't be an "other" in order for the discharge of these duties to be morally required. World-regarding duties go beyond other-regarding duties, in the sense that they stem from an awareness that respecting others requires that we respect the world that sustains their existence. By "world", I do not simply mean to refer to planet Earth. For we can make sense of the claim that, say, there would be some moral wrongness to testing a powerful space cannon by blowing up an uninhabited and otherwise unremarkable planet (even if this planet is in a galaxy far, far away).[192] And, beyond intuitions concerning the intrinsic value of celestial bodies, to behold the very existence of the universe is to be moved by awe and wonder.[193] These emotions are not to be dismissed, for they guide us to the realisation that we intuitively consider ourselves to have world-regarding duties. This category of emotions best captures some intuitions. Kantians sometimes suggest ways in which humanity can be degraded even if it is not an *individual's* humanity that is being degraded.

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[191] In order for one to accept the claim that it is wrong to harm non-consenting patients, one first has to accept that one has duties toward others apart from oneself. (A fairly straightforward point, on the face of it, but recall my discussion on the moral perspective of the psychopath, for whom the notion of other-regarding duties might exert no intuitive pull.)
[192] And, of course, we would likely consider it profoundly tragic if, after blowing up this planet, we somehow later discovered that it was inhabited—even if its only inhabitants were unicellular organisms. This would particularly sting if, up until this point, we had not known of any planet apart from our own that sustained life forms.
[193] Astronauts viewing Earth from space often report being overwhelmed, as well as an increased sense of identification with the human race and the planet itself—a phenomenon dubbed "the overview effect". For discussion of this phenomenon, see White (1987), and Yaden et al. (2016). For an influence analysis of the emotion of awe, see Keltner and Haidt (2003).

A consequence of recognising world-regarding duties is that this weighs against the (Benatarian) notion that we do not have duties toward the preservation of our species. Recall that in my above discussion on dignity, I argued that the extinction of the human race would represent, (virtually) *sub specie aeternitatis*, a tragic loss of value to the world. Indeed, I have been arguing that we ought to form moral judgements on these matters as *caretakers*. And as caretakers of the world, certain acts are simply not available to us. Specifically, we may not remove—annihilate—certain intrinsically valuable entities from the world, including our own species.

12.1. A phased extinction vs a phased evolution

If I am correct that we have a *pro tanto* duty to prevent the extinction of the human race, then we may be permitted to procreate (regular humans—albeit via the assistance of PGD, at least) until we are successfully able to transition to a future with radically diminished pain and suffering. To see why I think this, consider, again, three scenarios. As a collective, humanity could commit to one of the following three procreative projects. First, we could continue with our current procreative "project", which is to have children without a sophisticated understanding of the ethics of procreation. Most people today, at least in industrialised countries, are anti-natalists to some degree, though this is almost always motivated by financial or self-regarding reasons.[194] Of course, the anti-natalist argues that procreation is morally impermissible within this state of affairs.

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[194] Many people express the desire to be child-free, at least for the foreseeable future, so that they may be free to travel or pursue their careers.

The second scenario would be Benatar's voluntary phased extinction, which allows for *some* procreation. Recall that, due to the probability of the last generations suffering terribly, he argues that "the creation of new generations could only possibly be acceptable […] if it were aimed at phasing out people" (Benatar 2006:184). Again, the anti-natalist thinks that procreation in the first scenario is untenable. And I have argued against the intuitions undergirding scenario two. But there is another, third scenario that offers a way forward.

Aside from business-as-usual procreation, or procreation during a voluntary phased extinction, I submit that the anti-natalist must give due regard to procreative permissibility during what might be termed a *phased evolution.* As I have discussed above, transhumanism aims to eradicate pain and suffering from the human condition. The transhumanist is interested in correcting what he perceives to the be greatest problems facing an individual who is born (merely) human, namely that individual's susceptibility to pain, disease, injury, and (early) death—in other words, the general fragility of her mortality. It is primarily this fragility that the transhumanist wishes to address via genetic enhancements and other technological interventions.

Such an ambitious project, if it is indeed realised, will take tremendous ingenuity, resources, and worldwide cooperation. But it will also take time. Indeed, it may call for several generations of creating unenhanced or proto-transhuman individuals. My assertion, then, is that an "all things considered" assessment of the morality of procreation must take into account the possibility that the moral landscape—particularly as it relates to welfarism—could be radically altered via human enhancement technologies. I submit that with these technologies in mind, and with

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the transhumanist project they could make possible, procreation may be morally permissible—though only under very strict circumstances (namely if it is toward facilitating the transition toward a transhumanist future).

To be clear, I am arguing not only that transhumanism is plausible, but also that anti-natalists ought to at least be willing to review their pro-extinction position in light of it. In plainer terms, I have presented to the anti-natalist an alternative to voluntary extinction; were he to reject this alternative without sufficiently engaging with it, he would arguably open himself up to the charge that he is an anti-natalist for misanthropic, and not philanthropic reasons.[195]

12.2. A note on a transhuman future as the *de facto* "extinction" of the human species

I have been arguing that we have a *pro tanto* duty to avoid the extinction of the human race, and that this must be weighed against the view that there is an inherent wrongness to exposing new human beings to the harms of existence. To this end, I have advocated the adoption of some version of the transhumanist project. It could be argued, though, that what I am advocating would in fact amount to a kind of extinction. According to this line of reasoning, transhumans would be a different species – one that would exist separate from, and possibly replace, *homo sapiens.* This sentiment has been expressed thusly:

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[195] I have not been trying to argue against misanthropic reasons for an anti-natal position, so I will continue to assume, for the sake of argument, that any anti-natalist readers of the present work are motivated by a genuine desire to avoid unnecessary harm to future humans.

> There are limits to how far we can go in changing our human nature without changing our humanity and our basic human values. Because it is the meaning of our humanness (our distinctness from other animals) that has given birth to our concepts of both human dignity and human rights, altering our nature necessarily threatens to undermine both human dignity and human rights. (Annas 2000:773)

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that it is true that transhumans would be a different species (or, at least, subspecies), and, further, that transhumans will come to replace regular humans peacefully. To say that this transition to a transhuman future would represent an "extinction" rests on an untested assumption, namely that transhumans would not be human in the morally relevant sense—human, that is, in the sense that *we* are human. I argue, on the contrary, that transhumans could plausibly share what it is that makes us human.

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I believe that what makes us human—what gives us a dignity—is something we could, and ought to, share with transhumans. Chiefly, we, and future humans, could both care about the same cluster of intrinsically valuable goods. Thus, we would not differ in the morally relevant sense; we *would* differ, however, in our capacities to respect these goods. Think here of the capacity an adult has to care for intrinsically valuable goods, compared to this capacity in a child. Both have (human) dignity—both can care about, roughly, the same cluster of values. But the adult is usually better able to act in ways that respect these values. With greater self-control and intelligence, particularly as it relates to moral reasoning, an adult can act in ways that are more respectful of his dignity, as well as the dignity of others. And this capacity

might be far greater still in a transhuman. What is more, in terms of world-regarding duties, transhumans might be more respectful of the environment than (current) humanity has just far been.

And so, apart from thinking of transhumans as members of a potentially different species, we might gain a more enlightened perspective by thinking of them as older, wiser, more mature siblings. Bioconservatives fear that there will be animosity between the enhanced and unenhanced. But this need not be the case. Presumably, the siblings of people with congenital insensitivity to pain, or genius-level IQs, still believe them to be worthy of dignified treatment. And vice versa. Though your brother may have been born without the capacity to feel pain, and though you might be in awe of this as though it were a sort of superpower, your perception of him as a being possessing a dignity would, and ought to, restrain you from using him as a human piñata. To use a more serious example, even if one knows that a person has been born without the ability to feel pain, this in no way justifies one using that person as a slave, or as a means toward justifying one's sexual desires. This is because a very (morally) significant component of having a dignity consists of caring about how others respect this value within oneself.[196]

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Here is one final way to better understand the "human" in "transhuman". We might imagine them in a similar vein to how we compare ourselves to so-called

[196] On this point, an anti-natalist might argue that this is a world which, in its current state, has too many threats to the dignity of individual existers. That is to say, his intuition here is that individual existers are beings with a superlative worth that is far too likely to be untenably injured by being in the world. I am of the view that the anti-natalist should, his views of procreation notwithstanding, support efforts to make the world better, so that it might be one where this value (dignity) is more adequately respected.

"enlightened" individuals—gurus, monks, and other people[197] who have seemingly managed to free themselves from the shackles of desire, worry, and fluctuating moods. These are people who are, in other words, able to deal with the difficult task of being human with an almost transcendent dignity. In this way, transhumans, instead of being seen as something other than what is currently considered "human", can instead be viewed as individuals who might be *better at being human.* The best of us admit that we are constantly failing to live up to the finest versions of ourselves. Whilst we might excuse our failings as "all too human", they need not be, and usually are not, considered fundamental, inescapable facets of human nature. Indeed, the human project consists of, in large part, constructing mechanisms and means toward limiting our fallibilities, and the dangers they pose to ourselves and others. A transhumanist project could be viewed as a natural progression of this striving to be better humans.

To further understand my intuitions here, consider why a genotype-based definition of "human" might be too narrow and parochial. Think of how we discover the presence of human activity in some remote corner of our world. What markers identify the presence of this humanness? Not, surely, the mere presence of certain genetic markers—that is, bits of genetic material that might be gleaned from samples collected and subsequently examined in a laboratory. When encountering the prehistoric cave paintings in *Cueva de las Manos* (Cave of Hands), it would be strange for one to ask: "But how can we be sure they were human?" More than any other species, perhaps, *human* life is best identified by its phenotypical presence in, and impact upon, a world.

[197] Perhaps vegans.

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To be sure, these phenotypical phenomena are the effect of genes on the world (Dawkins 1982). But, though it involves genetic engineering, transhumanism need not signify an end to the human project. Genetic engineering might threaten to destroy the presence of humanness in the world only if it seriously altered those genetic features that expressed the core facets of our humanity. Transhumanism, as I have defended it, does not aim at this. Rather, it is an attempt to polish and perfect our humanity, not an attempt to it override or destroy it. A transhuman future would not silence the song of humanity; rather, it would augment its sweetness, and, moreover, enable listeners to truly appreciate the full spectrum of its beauty.

12.3. Two views on human nature, two perspectives on the future of humanity

Within the pro-enhancement community, there exists a very beguiling and infectious attitude of techno-optimism. This attitude deserves a moment of consideration. According to Baylis & Robert, a future shaped by human enhancement technologies is inevitable because "*the future is ours for the shaping*" (2004:23; authors' emphasis):

> Here we offer an *avant garde* sketch of human nature. Humans are indeed imperfect creatures, but imperfection is not a necessary condition for humanness. Humans are not merely inquisitive or competitive; rather, we posit that the essential characteristics of humanness are *perfectibility* and the biosocial drive to pursue perfection. These essential characteristics are neither merely naturally present nor culturally driven, but rather biosocially over-

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> determined. We are on the cusp of what may prove to be our final evolutionary stage. (Baylis & Robert 2004:25; authors' emphasis)

Those taken by such a view of human nature might be inspired to declare that they desire to be a posthuman when they grow up (Bostrom 2008), or to boldly assert that our destiny is to colonise the universe (Kurzweil 1999;2005). I do not mean to endorse this extreme techno-optimism. I mention it because, in truth, I think it in fact provides a far more fitting description of human nature than one that promotes extinction as a plausible solution to humanity's troubles.

Certain irreversible paths toward ending suffering seem reasonable—until, that is, we embark upon them. If it were true that it would be best if humanity went extinct, then it would be better, all things being equal, if we could end human existence as rapidly as possible, rather than extending the extinction period. Imagine there is a big red button on a desk somewhere. Let us call this the stop button. Pressing this button will rapidly, irreversibly, and near-painlessly bring about the end of the human race.

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Alongside it is another button. This one is blue. Let us call it "the pause button". Pressing this latter button will gift each member of the human community with what might be called a moment of clarity. In this moment, all hatred, depression, and craving will dissolve as though it were never there. Each of us will fall into a sort of gap between the incessant train of thoughts that usually plagues us. And whilst in this gap, we will all experience a deep sense of interconnectedness with each other, the planet, and the universe that cradles it. We will all come to the realisation that, if we might be able to find the time, motivation, and clarity of purpose and vision, we

could, and should, work together to solve the problem of needless human suffering. Now, this moment will of course pass, and there is no guarantee that those breaking free from its spell would take any lessons from it into their daily lives. But let us leave the pause button for now, and return to the stop button by way of a story.

The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, USA, is a breath-taking feat of engineering. It is also a dark magnet, exerting a deathly pull on those desperately seeking a way out. Jumpers are drawn in by the spectacular views, as well as the tragically mistaken belief that leaping from the bridge will grant them an easy, painless death. Since its opening in 1927, it is estimated that well over a thousand people have jumped off the bridge's railings into the cold, churning water below. It is a swift but terrifying drop that only 26 have survived (Guthmann 2005).

On 25 August, 1985, twenty-eight-year-old Ken Baldwin announced that he needed to work late at the office. There was nothing to suggest to his wife and three-year-old daughter that he never intended to come back home. Driving straight to the Golden Gate Bridge, he lingered near the railing, working up the courage to jump. Repeating to himself that there was no other way out from the deep depression that had been consuming him, he pushed through the fear and leapt over the edge. At once, he was overwhelmed with a terrible sense of regret over his decision: "I instantly realized that everything in my life that I'd thought was unfixable was totally fixable—except for having just jumped" (Baldwin quoted in Friend 2003).

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12.4. Transhumanism and non-Benatarian forms of anti-natalism

This will be quick. Assuming they have no firm objection to transhumanism, I would imagine that most people who adhere to a welfare-based form of anti-natalism should welcome attempts to radically decrease the amount of pain and suffering a life typically contains.

Setting aside anti-natalists who are also bioconservatives, there might be some anti-natalists, who would still object to the continued existence of humans (in whatever physically modified form they might appear) due to environmental concerns, or concerns over the welfare of other species (Harrison & Tanner 2011). And, to be sure, there would still be environmental constraints in a transhuman future (unless our successors manage to colonise other planets), so a limited anti-natalism would still be required. If these concerns could somehow be adequately address, perhaps it would only be a kind of dogmatism—or, what is worse, a dogmatically misanthropic outlook—it would be hard to see why most anti-natalists would object to such a (hypothetical) future.[198]

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[198] Though there is still the harm of death—assuming our successors do not find ways to escape it, or better make sense of it. This is a topic I have deliberately avoided in this thesis, as I have little stomach for it. For recent explorations on the harm of death by braver souls than me, see Benatar (2017) (especially Chapter 5), Belshaw (2009), and Luper (2009).

13. Conclusion

Anti-natalism ought to be praised for not letting us forget that the harms of life are serious, and that they ought to factor into our procreative decisions. At the end of her book, *The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May Be Permissible*, a thoughtful and mature reflection on the morality of child-bearing, Rivka Weinberg summarises arguably the biggest lesson that anti-natalism should teach us:

> If you want more people to be able to permissibly procreate, slogans and easy, lazy, and ultimately pernicious permissions are not going to cut it. You have to change the world. (Weinberg 2016:248)

Change the world. The anti-natalist, who holds no hope of this ever being a world into which we may bring in new humans, would do well to reflect on this. Anti-natalism is silent on (or, at best, pessimistic regarding) the issue as to whether the world can ever be *made* better, so that it might one day be permissible to bring new humans into it. This is where the anti-natalist would do well to meaningfully engage with transhumanism.

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I have argued that a thorough assessment of the potential wrongness of procreation must take into account non-welfarist goods (dignity and meaningfulness). And it must also, I have argued, take into account the possibility that future "humans" will experience far less pain and suffering than current generations. Though genetic engineering technologies come with their own risks, when it comes to the problem of human suffering, perhaps we ought to avoid an attitude that "cynically assumes that nothing can be done" (Häyry 1994:152). Anti-natalists ought to reflect on the

possibility of improving the human condition through some version of the transhumanist project, a way of finally breaking free of the bonds of suffering that does not appeal to an irreversible pro-mortalist "solution". Perhaps nearly everything problematic about human existence could be fixed—apart from *that*.

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