In this essay, I want to address three issues that are not often considered together – at least not by philosophers. The first issue is procreation or, more specifically, the procreative decisions of individuals: their decisions about whether to try to have children. The second issue is immigration, and especially our attitudes toward large-scale immigration to the countries in which we live. The third issue is the future of humanity, which many people regard as increasingly insecure. These three issues may seem unrelated, and they are often considered in isolation from one another, but I believe that there are important connections among them. And although academic philosophers have not said much about those connections, a variety of social and political actors have noticed them and have sought to exploit them to advance political

\* This paper has a somewhat complicated history. Its origins lie in a short essay that I published, under the title “A World Without Children,” in *The Point, Issue 20* (Fall, 2019): 89-95. An expanded version of that essay was presented as the Reverend Richard Gelwick Endowed Lecture at the Hobby School of Public Affairs at the University of Houston on November 15, 2019. Richard Gelwick was a professor, a minister, a scholar of philosophy and theology, and a social activist who took part in both the civil rights movement and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. A revised version of the Gelwick lecture was subsequently prepared for delivery as the Frans van Hasselt Lecture at the Delft University of Technology. Frans van Hasselt was a student at TU Delft who, in November of 1940, at the age of 27, gave a speech denouncing the firing of Jewish faculty members at the university. He was arrested the next year by the German occupying forces and died in 1942 in Buchenwald. The van Hasselt lecture was originally to have been delivered on May 7, 2020, during commemorations of the 75\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary of the liberation of Holland from Nazi occupation, but it had to be postponed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This draft is a revised version of the undelivered lecture.
agendas that I consider worrisome and potentially destructive. It is time, I think, to bring the discussion of these issues into the philosophical mainstream where they can be examined with the thoroughness and care that they require. The first three sections of this paper are intended as a modest step in that direction. In the fourth section, I will illustrate some of my conclusions by applying them briefly to two other issues of current concern: climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. I realize that this may seem like an unreasonable number of topics to be discussing in a single paper. The only thing I can say in my defense is that the topics all seem to me to be connected in ways that I will try to explain.

I. Immigration and Procreation

Let me start on a personal note. My wife and I never spent much time talking about whether we wanted to have children. It was clear to both of us that we did, and our only concern was that we might not be able to. Yet if you had asked me why I wanted to have children, I would not have had anything very articulate to say. Nor did that fact bother me. Having children just seemed like the natural next step, and I felt no need to have or give reasons.

For increasing numbers of people in developed countries, things are not so simple. The decision whether to have children is regarded as an important lifestyle choice. Many people choose not to have children, and they bristle at the description of themselves as “childless.” The preferred description is “childfree,” which suggests the absence of a burden (compare “carefree”) rather than a form of privation (compare “homeless,” “jobless,” or “penniless”). A childfree lifestyle is appealing to many, and
marketers regard two-career couples without children as an attractive target demographic.

Of course, not everyone is sympathetic to the choice not to have children. People who make that choice are sometimes accused of selfishness. The gist of the accusation is that an unwillingness to raise children reflects an unseemly form of self-involvement, whereas parenthood involves a willingness to put the needs of others first. Yet advocates of childfree living return the charge of selfishness with interest. They speak contemptuously of those who have children as “breeders” and argue that the intense involvement of parents in their children’s lives itself amounts to a form of selfishness. The choice to have children, in this view, reflects something closer to narcissism than to altruism.

For much of human history, these charges and counter-charges would have seemed strange, if not unintelligible. Having children was an economic necessity. It was the predictable result of satisfying powerful biological urges. And it was justified and valorized by the prevailing religious and secular conceptions of sex and gender. Things have changed as a result of a number of factors. One is the ready availability of effective contraception, which has made sex without conception routine. Another is increased affluence, which has diminished the economic imperative to have children. Still another is the dramatic change, over the last century, in the social and political status of women, and their entry into the paid workforce in large numbers. These developments have combined to produce forceful challenges to traditional understandings of sex roles, family life, and gender categories. And they have made it increasingly natural to think of decisions about whether to have children simply as matters of free individual choice, on a par with the choice of occupation and other
important decisions about how to live one’s life. For anyone who values freedom and equality, these changes are greatly to be welcomed.

Yet decisions about procreation can also be viewed from a broader perspective. Across the developed world, birth and fertility rates are falling. (A country’s birthrate is usually defined as the number of live births per 1000 persons in the population during a given year. Its fertility rate is, roughly, the average number of children projected to be born per woman throughout her childbearing years.) Japan, with a fertility rate of 1.43, had its biggest recorded population decline in 2018.¹ According to current projections, its population is expected to decline by 36 million people – almost 30% -- by 2065.² But fertility rates are just as low or lower in many other Asian and European countries, including Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Spain, Italy, Greece, Poland and Portugal. In still other countries, including France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, fertility rates are a bit higher, but they remain below the level at which a population replaces itself from one generation to the next, which for developed countries is usually taken to be 2.1.³ According to World Bank statistics, 57 of 63 high income countries were below that level in 2016.⁴ If the total

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² https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/04/10/national/social-issues/japans-population-projected-plunge-88-million-2065/#XVv3ny2ZPs0

³ https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sp.dyn.tfrt.in

population is still growing in some of these countries, one important reason is that immigration has helped make up the difference.\(^5\)

There is an obvious irony in this. Hostility to immigration and to immigrants has been on the rise throughout Europe and North America. It has contributed to the recent waves of populist and nationalist sentiment that have transformed politics in those places and beyond. Yet as long as fertility rates in affluent countries remain below replacement level, those countries must depend on immigration to avoid depopulation. It is often observed that affluent societies like the United States rely on immigrants, both documented and undocumented, to do the difficult, dangerous, poorly-paid jobs that nobody else is willing to do. In effect, those of us who are citizens of the United States outsource these unwanted jobs to the very people against whom we direct our resentment and hostility. What is not always sufficiently appreciated, however, is that one of the unwanted jobs we are outsourcing to immigrants is the job of creating new Americans and thus enabling American society to sustain itself over time.

At the individual level, our reasons for doing so may be unimpeachable. That is, individuals may have excellent reasons for deciding that they do not want to have any – or many – children. The fact remains, however, that if enough of us decide, even for the very best of reasons, that we do not want to have children, and if, at the same time, we want our society to be sustained and to flourish over time, then we must look to people elsewhere in the world to have the children we do not want to have. Those people must undertake the procreative labor required to sustain our way of life.

For white nationalists and white supremacists, the lesson to be learned from this is that American women, and in particular white American women, need to start having more children. Iowa’s (soon to be ex-) Congressman Steve King spoke for these people when he sent his notorious tweet in support of the Dutch politician Geert Wilders, saying that “We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies.”

But for the vast numbers of Americans who find white nationalism and white supremacy abhorrent, the lesson is different. If we want our country to survive and to flourish, and if we are dependent on immigration to sustain our population from generation to generation, then what we owe to immigrants who come here is not hostility but gratitude. Rather than being threatened by new immigrants, or thinking of them as supplicants looking for our largesse, we should recognize how much we depend on them to preserve the society we cherish.

I think this conclusion is correct. But whether you agree with me about that or not, the underlying point is that those of us who live in affluent democratic societies face a trilemma. If the number of us who freely choose to have children is not sufficient to sustain our populations at anything near their current size, then either we must abandon the values of freedom and equality, especially as they apply to women, or we must accept that our societies will gradually become depopulated, or we must welcome more immigration. White nationalists and white supremacists might be happy to accept the first option, but for most of us, that option is, to put it mildly, unacceptable. I have suggested that we should instead choose the third option. But there is a problem with the third option.

This becomes clear if we ask where the immigrants will come from. Insofar as they come from poorer countries, where the values of freedom and equality have not been realized, our reliance on the third option means it is in our interest that conditions in their home countries should not improve. After all, if the poorer countries achieved levels of education and affluence comparable to ours, and if they realized the values of freedom and equality to the same extent that we have, then people living in those countries would have less reason to emigrate. So if we rely on the third option as a solution to our trilemma, then we are, in effect, relying on the persistence of poverty and oppression in other countries to solve our problem. Our own societies can flourish and realize their basic values only if other societies do not flourish and do not realize those same values. If we accept this, it calls into question our commitment to the values we profess to hold dear. How deep can our commitment to those values be if we choose to solve our problems in a way that requires their violation?

So perhaps we should think more seriously about the second option. Perhaps, in other words, we should simply reconcile ourselves to the fact that our affluent, democratic societies will experience gradual depopulation as long as fertility rates fall below the replacement level. Why should that be regrettable? To be sure, a shrinking population can create a host of social and economic challenges, as the Japanese have discovered. And it is worth noting that an important part of Thomas Piketty’s argument in Capital in the Twenty-First Century is that, in the absence of far-reaching institutional reform, a stagnant or declining population will contribute to increased inequality by magnifying the influence of inherited capital. Still, it is not clear why it

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must be bad, in principle, for a country’s population size to grow gradually smaller, especially if that is the consequence of the free choices made by its citizens.

Of course, if political and economic conditions improve sufficiently in the countries of the developing world, those countries too may begin to experience declining birth and fertility rates. We may reach the point where it is not just currently affluent societies that face the prospect of declining population size. Humanity as a whole may begin to shrink. In fact, in a recent analysis of United Nations data, the Pew Research Center predicted that the global fertility rate will fall to 1.9, which is below replacement level, by 2070. And in an article published in The Lancet earlier this year, a team of researchers from the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation predicted that it would fall to below 1.7 by 2100, with the populations of 23 countries shrinking to half their current size and 183 countries having fertility rates below replacement level. If those of us who live in affluent societies regard a shrinking human population as unacceptable, but nevertheless don’t wish to have more children ourselves, then we must hope these predictions are wrong. We must hope for the persistence of high fertility rates elsewhere in the world to sustain not only our own societies but the human population as a whole. Yet if we hope for this despite knowing

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that those high rates are the outgrowth of poverty, low levels of education, and the unequal status of women, then the depth of our commitment to the values of freedom and equality is again called into question.

But is a declining global population really something to regret? The human population did not reach one billion until about 1800, and it is now approaching eight billion. It has experienced continuous growth since the fourteenth century and has more than doubled in just the last sixty years. We should not simply assume that additional growth would be a good thing. Population growth has already caused serious environmental problems, and these are likely to become more severe with additional growth. Moreover, there are limits to the population that the earth can support, even though there is disagreement about where exactly those limits lie. However that disagreement may be resolved, many people would argue that we have more reason to be concerned about global over-population than about global under-population.

So perhaps the solution to our trilemma is to combine the second and third options. As long as immigration enables us to sustain our societies, we have at least one strong reason – there are others too – to welcome those who wish to immigrate. At the same time, we have reason to hope that global poverty will be alleviated, and that people everywhere will enjoy the benefits of human rights, universal education, and the rule of law. And we have reason to hope that these things will happen, despite the fact that, if they do, the flow of would-be migrants may then be reduced and our societies, and perhaps the world as a whole, may eventually face the prospect of gradual depopulation, at least for a while, as birth and fertility rates everywhere decline.

[[https://ourworldindata.org/world-population-growth]]
Even if we accept this solution, it casts some familiar philosophical debates in a different light. The extensive philosophical debate about immigration, for example, revolves primarily around the question of whether it is permissible for governments to limit immigration or whether open borders are required as a matter of justice. I have my own views about this matter and, for what it’s worth, I am more sympathetic than are some of my colleagues to the idea that, at least in an otherwise just world, it would, in principle, be legitimate for governments to limit immigration in certain ways. That is because I tend to think of a just political society not in purely instrumental terms but rather as an intrinsically valuable achievement, and because I am open to the thought that such a society may sometimes need to limit admission in order to sustain what is valuable about it. But none of this matters for present purposes. For the question I have been discussing is not whether it is permissible for governments to limit immigration but rather the extent to which developed countries need immigration in order to survive and to flourish, and what will happen to them if there are no longer enough people who wish to migrate. This is a question that has (to my knowledge) received less attention from philosophers. But Professor Christopher Murray, one of the authors of The Lancet article I cited, was quoted as telling the BBC that “[w]e will go from [a] period where it’s a choice to open borders, or not, to frank competition for migrants, as there won’t be enough.” If he is correct, then philosophers may need to go from debating the legitimacy of immigration restrictions to considering what norms and principles should govern the competition for migrants.

Similarly, the trilemma we’ve been discussing forces us to consider the philosophical significance of population size from a somewhat unfamiliar perspective.

At least since the publication of Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons* in 1984, there has been an explosion of work in the field of what has come to be called “population ethics.” This field is preoccupied with puzzles that arise when one thinks about hypothetical choices among populations with different sizes and distributions of well-being. A great deal of discussion is devoted to rather outré examples of fanciful, schematic choices that are meant to focus our attention on certain questions of abstract moral theory. By contrast, the issues I have been discussing here might well be described as issues of “population ethics,” in a perfectly natural and non-specialist sense of that term, but they are issues about concrete policy predicaments faced here and now by existing societies.

In addition to casting familiar philosophical debates in a different light, this discussion invites us to situate people’s personal decisions about whether to have children in a broader context. Although procreative decisions are properly viewed as matters of individual choice, they nevertheless belong to wider social patterns that raise a range of questions about the future of our society and our world: questions ranging from immigration policy to the scope and depth of our commitment to liberal values. At the most basic level, they raise questions about the kind of future we want our countries and humanity as a whole to have.

II. The Future of Humanity

This point comes into sharper focus if we step back for a moment and think about a more radical possibility. So far, we have been considering the prospect of

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gradual national and global depopulation as a result of declining fertility rates. At least as a thought experiment, though, we can consider a more drastic possibility. Instead of imagining merely that global fertility rates were to fall below replacement level, let’s instead ask ourselves what it would be like if everyone freely decided to live a childfree life. Let’s suppose, in other words, that prospective parents everywhere made the individual decision to stop having children, so that we faced the prospect not of gradual depopulation but rather of imminent extinction, as an aging human population faded away without having reproduced itself. As a practical possibility, of course, this idea is outlandish. It’s not going to happen. But suppose it did. What would it be like to live in a world without children?

In her novel *The Children of Men*, P.D. James offers an imaginative answer to that question. In James’s novel, the absence of children and the imminent extinction of humanity result not from the free choices of individuals but from a mysterious form of infertility that has afflicted the entire human race. When the novel opens, no new human beings have been born in over 25 years, and the end of the human race is imminent as people inexorably die out. In this scenario, and by contrast to most apocalyptic literature and film, the disappearance of humanity will be accomplished without any existing person dying violently or prematurely. People are simply fading away: day by day, month by month, year by year. How would you feel if you found yourself in those circumstances?

I believe, as P.D. James evidently did, that many people would view humanity’s imminent disappearance as a catastrophe, and that they would be liable to experience symptoms of gloom, grief, and even despair, despite the fact that neither their own lives nor the lives of any existing individual they cared about would end prematurely. The perceived catastrophe would be that no new people were going to be born. And to the extent that we would indeed perceive this fact – the fact that no new people were going to be born – as a catastrophe, this teaches us something important and perhaps surprising about ourselves. It indicates that many of us have a direct and intense concern for the survival of humanity, a concern that is independent of, and coexists with, our concern for the identifiable individuals we know and love. It is also independent of, and coexists with, our concern for the particular communities to which we belong and the particular ways of life with which we identify. To be sure, the death of a loved one or the disappearance of a community or way of life can also be experienced as devastating. Indeed, we are all too familiar with these shattering forms of loss and destruction. But what James’s thought experiment seems to reveal is something that is less often noticed, namely, that in addition to our attachments to particular individuals and communities, many of us have a concern for the survival of humanity as such, even if we don’t always recognize this fact. I do not think it is going too far to describe this concern as a form of love: the love of humanity.

I realize that this may strike some people as sentimental rubbish. Who in his right mind can look at today’s world (or yesterday’s world either, for that matter) and find evidence that a love of humanity is a significant feature of human motivation or behavior? But in speaking of a love of humanity I am not ignoring (how could I?) the

long and sorry history, continuing to this day, of human violence, cruelty, and barbarism. In fact, as I will emphasize toward the end of this paper, it is precisely because of that history that it is important to call attention to what I am calling a love of humanity, and to insist that it too is part of human beings’ complex motivational repertoire. By a “love of humanity,” I do not mean a warm, affectionate feeling that is available to introspection. Love takes many forms, depending on its objects, but the model of introspectable feeling is a poor model for most of them. The love of humanity, as I understand it, comprises a syndrome of attitudes and dispositions that includes, among other things, a desire that the chain of generations should extend into the future under conditions conducive to human flourishing, and a disposition to grief and sorrow at the prospect of humanity’s imminent destruction. I do not claim that the love of humanity, so understood, is universal, only that is widespread, despite the fact that it coexists with many other interpersonal attitudes, including, often, aggressive and destructive ones.

When I have made this suggestion on other occasions, it has often been met with skepticism. The skeptics complain that I have overstated the implications of James’s thought experiment. They do not deny that many of us would react with deep distress if we found ourselves in the circumstances that James describes. And they agree that those reactions could not be interpreted as manifestations of grief about the premature deaths of our loved ones, since, under the terms of James’s scenario, the lives of our loved ones would not be cut short at all. On the other hand, the skeptics point out, many existing communities, cultures, and ways of life would, in that scenario, disappear sooner than they otherwise would have. Unlike the lives of individuals, the “lives” of these communities and cultures would be cut short. And since, as I have acknowledged, the disappearance of a community or a culture or a way of life can be
experienced as devastating by its adherents, our strong reactions to James’s thought experiment may show only the strength of our particularistic attachments, by which I mean our attachments to our own communities and ways of life. That is, our reactions may show how devastated we would be by the imminent disappearance of the communities and ways of life that we treasure, but they don’t show that we have an attachment to humanity itself. Moreover, the skeptics say, there is no reason to suppose that many people do have such an attachment. The observed facts of human behavior suggest, to the contrary, that communal allegiances have an intensity that seldom characterizes purely humanitarian motives and sentiments. We have strong evidence that many people care intensely about the future of their own community or way of life, and very little evidence that they have a comparable concern for the future of humanity as a whole. Since these more particularistic concerns suffice to explain our reactions to James’s scenario, there is no basis for claiming that those reactions reveal anything that might be called a love of humanity. Or so the skeptics I have encountered insist.

Indeed, they assert, there is an additional reason for thinking that the particularistic explanation is better than the humanitarian one. As Steve King’s inflammatory tweet in support of Geert Wilders reminds us, people’s attachments and allegiances are often accompanied by strong inter-communal antipathies and animosities. So suppose that we ask the following question. If one knew that one’s own community or way of life was about to disappear, would one take consolation in the fact that the communities and ways of life of one’s rivals and enemies would endure? Surely not, the skeptics say. Yet that is exactly what the humanitarian explanation would predict, and the skeptics argue that the implausibility of this prediction reinforces the conclusion that James’s thought experiment provides no evidence of a love of humanity. Even if we would be devastated to find ourselves in the
circumstances she describes, the best explanation of that fact appeals only to our particularistic allegiances and not to a concern for humanity as such.

Of course, it may be said in reply to the skeptic, there is no reason to think that the perception of humanity’s imminent disappearance as a catastrophe would be limited solely to those with strong communal allegiances and identifications. Some people with more individualistic self-conceptions might also find the prospect of humanity’s imminent extinction unbearably depressing, and their reactions could not be explained in particularistic terms. Rather than denying this, the skeptics generally concede that some people, when faced with the prospect of humanity’s imminent extinction, might evince a form of concern for humanity as such. Nevertheless, they insist, this form of concern would be relatively rare. Humanitarian concern is not unheard of, but it is a minority taste and it pales in significance when compared to the power of communal attachments and allegiances. So, despite their concession, the skeptics continue to affirm their basic claim, namely, that our reactions to James’s scenario give no evidence of a general or widespread concern for humanity as such. Although the reactions of some individuals might best be seen as manifesting such a concern, most of those reactions are better explained in other, more particularistic terms.

This form of skepticism is understandable. In these intensely divided and polarized times, the idea that a love of humanity is a significant element in our affective and motivational repertoire may seem not merely false but absurd. The best I can do, by way of response to such skepticism, is to invite you to think carefully about the character of the reaction you would have if you found yourself in circumstances like the ones that James describes. I grant, of course, that people’s reactions might vary, and that it would be foolish to suppose that they would be uniform or that a single reaction
would be universal. Still, for many of us, including many of us who do have strong attachments to particular communities, cultures, or ways of life, I am convinced that the experience of confronting the imminent disappearance of humanity would have a distinctive character, quite unlike the experience of confronting the disappearance of a cherished way of life. This conviction cannot be given direct empirical support, at least not yet. Human beings have never yet confronted the prospect of imminent extinction, even though there have been historical moments at which some group of people believed – sometimes misguidedly and sometimes because there was a genuine threat that did not materialize – that they were facing such a prospect. By contrast, we have a great deal of experience of people’s actual responses to the disappearance of a way of life, and of course we have even more experience of people’s responses to the genuinely universal phenomenon of the death of a beloved individual. The emotional intensity of these responses, when juxtaposed with the absence of any experience of people’s responses to the imminent disappearance of humanity, is the correlate, on the side of loss, of the contrast between the observed intensity of particularistic attachments and the apparently milder force of humanitarian motives and sentiments.

James’s thought experiment invites us to look beyond or behind these contrasts, and to consider the possibility that it is only because we have not yet faced the prospect of the destruction of humanity as such that we don’t appreciate how powerful our reactions to that prospect would be. And it is only because we don’t appreciate how powerful our reactions to that prospect would be that it seems plausible to think of purely humanitarian concern as being a relatively mild sentiment or a minority taste.

To put it another way, James’s thought experiment encourages us to redirect our attention, at least for a while, away from the relatively familiar, always powerful, and sometimes shattering experiences of personal and communal loss, and to think
imaginatively about what it would be like – what it really would be like – to realize that humanity itself was about to disappear forever. For many of us, as I said, the experience of confronting this prospect would have a distinctive character. This is not a claim about the phenomenological intensity of the experience. The point is not that, however devastated some of us might feel about the loss of a beloved individual or a cherished way of life, we would feel even more devastated by the prospect of humanity’s disappearance. The point is rather that the object of our feelings of loss would be different in this case, and, accordingly, that the character of this experience of loss would differ from other experiences of loss. Something similar might be said, incidentally, about the cases of personal and communal loss themselves. These differ from one another, after all. Losing a loved one is a different kind of experience than having a cherished way of life disappear, and the differences between them are not best understood using the metric of phenomenological intensity. What is more relevant is the fact that, in the first case but not the second, our feelings are focused on a particular beloved individual whom we knew intimately. Yet the power of experiences of both types is undeniable. In James’s hypothetical case, the object of our feelings of loss would again be different. In this case, the object of those feelings would be humanity itself, and it is my conviction that many people would view this as an independent source of grief, of unbearable sadness.

Our response to the prospect of humanity’s imminent disappearance would be distinctive in another way too. It would consist in part in a recognition that the realm of value itself had been gravely compromised. In perceiving the imminent extinction of humanity as a catastrophe, in other words, we would be registering our recognition of the fact that, under those conditions, a wide range of human activities would no longer be worth engaging in – or, at any rate, that the value of engaging in them would be
considerably diminished. And their value would be reduced not just for us personally but for everyone. To take a simple example, the value of anyone’s engaging in cancer research would be substantially reduced if humanity were going to disappear in twenty or thirty years. There would be much less point in conducting such research. This contrasts with cases of personal loss. In the aftermath of a grievous personal loss, an individual cancer researcher might feel that there was no point in her continuing to conduct her research – indeed, she might feel that she simply couldn’t bear to do so. But, in the first place, this does not mean that her research activities would no longer be valuable if she did choose to engage in them. And, in the second place, it does not mean that it would no longer be worthwhile for other scientists to engage in cancer research. Similar remarks would apply, I believe, to the case of a cancer researcher who belonged to a cultural community or a way of life that was disappearing. Devastating as those developments might be for the researcher, they would not cast doubt on the value of cancer research. By contrast, the value of cancer research would be compromised by the prospect of humanity’s imminent extinction. As I have argued at length elsewhere, the same is true of many other activities. In regarding the prospect of imminent human extinction as a catastrophe, then, we would be registering not only our deep attachment to humanity itself but also our recognition that the realm of value was shrinking before our eyes.

Much the same point can be transposed into the key of the emotions. When people lose someone whom they love, often they experience a grief so intense they think it will never end. Sometimes they would actually prefer that it never end. For

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*a Why Worry about Future Generations?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Chapter Two.
their grief to end, they think, would mean that they had accepted the unacceptable. Grief, it seems to them, is the only way of registering the value of what they have lost, and to cease to experience grief would be tantamount to forgetting or neglecting that value. Nevertheless, philosophers and psychologists have argued that people are, as an empirical matter, remarkably resilient in the face of loss, and that grief tends in most cases to dissipate after a relatively modest period of time. Indeed, we sometimes think that it’s a problem – perhaps one that requires some special psychological explanation – if a person’s grief persists for more than a certain amount of time. As with other powerful emotions, like anger, we think that, at a certain point, the person needs to “let go” or to “move on.” Whether we are right about this, and if so why, is a fascinating question. Some philosophers have had their doubts. They have regarded our resilience as troubling, for more or less the same reasons that lead some of the bereaved to hope that their grief will not end. These philosophers have worried that the value of what a bereaved person has lost is a continuing source of reasons for grief and, accordingly, that there is something inappropriate about the end of grief. Whether they are right to be troubled, and if so why, is also a fascinating question. Indeed, it looks like much the same fascinating question, asked, as it were, from the other direction. But I won’t pursue these questions here. The question I want to ask is: what makes it possible for us to “move on,” or to “let go” of our grief, as we so often do? Although a complete enumeration of the conditions that make this possible might well be complex, two necessary conditions are simple. When bereaved people manage to let go of their grief

after what we judge to be an appropriate time, the death that they have been mourning has already happened. It is over. This first condition seems so obvious as almost to go without saying. At the same time, and this is the second condition, a post-mortem future remains open for the bereaved. There is something for them to move on to. But neither of these things would be true in James’s scenario. The thing that people were mourning – namely, the disappearance of humanity – would not be over; it would be unfolding in slow motion. And there would be no post-mortem future for the bereaved. Once humanity was extinct, they would be gone, and in no position to move on to anything. Their grief at the imminent disappearance of humanity would be, literally, the grief to end all grief, a response to a wound even time could not heal.

III. Freedom, Equality, and Children

Skepticism notwithstanding, then, I will continue to characterize the concern revealed by James’s thought experiment as amounting to a love of humanity. I do not claim that this concern is universal, only that it is much more widespread than one might have supposed. Furthermore, there is no reason to think that it is limited to people who have or wish to have children. To the contrary, people who prefer to remain child-free as individuals might nevertheless experience the imminent disappearance of humanity as a whole as catastrophic. Their personal procreative decisions need not reflect any lack of concern for the future of humanity.

Those of us who have such a concern could not face the prospect of a child-free world with equanimity. Even if we do not ourselves want to have children, we nevertheless want humanity to have a future. So there is a limit to the degree of depopulation we could happily accept. We want children to be produced – by
someone. And so, if we are also to retain our commitment to freedom and equality, we must hope that there will always be enough people who freely choose to have children. And we must hope that they will make this choice, whether or not they can articulate the reasons for it, even when doing so is neither an economic necessity nor the result of the subordination of women. We must hope, in other words, that they will make this choice even when they also enjoy the benefits of social equality, material well-being, universal education, and the rule of law. Only if that happens will our commitments to freedom, equality, and fairness be fully reconciled with our love of humanity.

In hoping that other people will freely choose to have children even if we do not wish to do so ourselves, we need not manifest any form of bad faith or hypocrisy. As a general matter, we are all in the position of hoping that other people will choose to do things that we do not wish to do ourselves. I hope that there will be people who choose to become doctors, farmers, and sanitation workers, for example, even though I do not wish to be a doctor, farmer, or sanitation worker myself. In fact, in a complex society with a correspondingly complex division of labor, that is my position with respect to a very large number of occupations. One of the advantages of a division of labor, after all, is that it allows each of us to reap the benefit of skills we do not possess and activities in which we have no desire to engage.

We must remember, however, that if, along with our love of humanity, we are to retain our commitments to freedom and equality, then what we must hope is not solely that enough people will choose to have children, but also that these choices will not be the product of economic necessity or the subordination of women. If we want people to have children, and we turn a blind eye to the fact that the people who do so live disproportionately in circumstances of poverty and sex and gender inequality, then we may be open to a charge of bad faith. The relevant form of bad faith consists not in the
mere fact that we profess a commitment to freedom and equality while tolerating poverty and inequality but rather in the fact that, despite our professed commitment to freedom and equality, we depend on the perpetuation of poverty and inequality in order to fulfil our largely unacknowledged hopes for the future of our societies and of humanity at large. And if, as in the case of immigration, we not only fail to acknowledge our hopes but direct our anger and resentment at the very people we depend on to satisfy them, then our bad faith is only compounded.

The first step toward avoiding such bad faith is simply to acknowledge our hopes for the future of humanity. For many of us, however, this may be harder to do than it seems, because these hopes cut against the grain of our self-understanding. We are accustomed to thinking that people in the past assigned great significance to their participation in the chain of human generations, in the ongoing succession of human lives. They possessed what might be called a *historicist sensibility,* and this sensibility exerted a strong influence on their understanding of value. It shaped their interpretation of the meaning and value of their activities and of the normative significance of their relations to their ancestors and descendants. It inclined them to situate their activities within ongoing historical traditions and to see the historical dimension of those activities as an important aspect of their value. By contrast, we don’t possess a historicist sensibility, or so many of us seem to think. We understand the meaning and significance of our own lives and activities in more thoroughly individualistic terms. But our concern for humanity’s survival and our profound sadness at the thought of its imminent extinction suggest that we retain more of a
historicist sensibility than we may have realized. We too see the value of many of our activities as dependent on our participation in the ongoing chain of generations.\footnote{Here I draw on my discussion in “Meaning and Value across the Generations,” in S. Gardiner ed., The Oxford Handbook of Intergenerational Ethics (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).}

In addition to teaching us something important about ourselves, this reveals something about the structure of our values and the relations among them. One common progressivist view is that the values of freedom and equality that most of us affirm supersede the values associated with more traditional or historicist orientations. According to this view, the transition from a traditional outlook to a modern outlook that emphasizes the freedom and equality of individuals is a straightforward indication of growing moral enlightenment. But the desire that people will continue to have children is a manifestation of an historicist and not an individualist sensibility. It is a concern not for the flourishing of beloved individuals but rather for the survival of humanity, for the perpetuation of the ongoing chain of human generations. This does not mean that our values are inconsistent or incoherent. But it does point to a significant form of diversity within our evaluative repertoire. We are committed to the freedom and equality of individuals, and most of us care deeply about certain particular individuals, but we also attach great importance to the survival and flourishing of humanity itself. Although there is no logical conflict among these values, practical conflicts among them are possible. That is, there may be circumstances in which they cannot be satisfied jointly. If, in the extreme scenario we have been discussing, everyone chose not to have children, then a concern for freedom and equality would mandate respect for those choices, but our concern for the survival of humanity would be thwarted, to our profound dismay.
As I said, this extreme scenario is outlandish. It is hard to imagine any realistic situation in which everyone would choose a child-free life. For the time being, as I have noted, global overpopulation strikes many people as being a more serious practical problem than global under-population. Yet, as we have seen, intimations of the conflict of values I have described lie just below the surface of current controversies about immigration. And despite the fact that the extreme scenario is outlandish, that conflict of values does have practical significance. For one thing, if global fertility rates really do fall below replacement level sometime during this century, as the Pew Research Center and the researchers at the University of Washington predict, and if those rates persist over a long period of time, then the cumulative effect of this, over many generations, may be a substantial reduction in the human population. Indeed, Professor Murray of the University of Washington told the BBC that if we can’t find a remedy for the predicted “jaw-dropping” population decline, “then eventually the species disappears,” although, he added, “that’s a few centuries away.” This suggests that, as a practical and not merely a theoretical matter, we may eventually have to ask how we might create conditions in which enough people would choose, under conditions of freedom and equality, to bear and raise children, and so to contribute to the survival of humanity in a way that is consistent with our other values.

But, of course, we should also be considering that question here and now, at least if we wish to avoid the form of bad faith I have discussed, which consists in relying on the perpetuation of poverty and inequality to fulfill our largely unacknowledged hopes for the future of humanity. If we do rely on poverty and inequality to fulfill those hopes, then we exhibit bad faith here and now, even if under-population is not yet a

severe problem. Furthermore, one unfortunate feature of our unacknowledged reliance on poverty and inequality to fulfill our hopes for the future of humanity is precisely that it makes those hopes easier to overlook. When we live in conditions of strong population growth, it is easy to assume that there will always be enough people who want to have children. So it is easy to ignore the extent to which we depend on people to have children. It is easy to ignore what I have called our love of humanity.

This is unfortunate because it leads to failures of self-understanding and contributes to the problem of bad faith. It is also unfortunate because the love of humanity is an important social and political resource, and one that has potential significance in many contexts, but its value as a resource cannot be fully realized unless we recognize its existence and take steps to nurture it. In the concluding section, I will illustrate these points with reference to two other issues of current concern: climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

IV. Climate Change and COVID-19

Climate change poses a serious and perhaps even an existential threat to the human race. Even if it never does cause the destruction of humanity as a whole, it may nevertheless cause a great deal of suffering and death, as indeed it has already begun to do. One obvious challenge we face, in attempting to respond to climate change, is to identify feasible and effective policy solutions. But another challenge is to motivate people to accept those solutions, especially if their implementation would be costly or burdensome. Even if solutions can be identified, in other words, people must be strongly and stably disposed to support them. Yet humanity has been painfully and dangerously slow to respond to the problem of climate change, and it is tempting to
interpret this slow response as evidence of a potentially devastating and disabling *motivational deficit*. It may seem that people do not, in general, possess the kinds of motives that would be necessary to generate robust and reliable support for effective remedial policies. The lethargic response to climate change seems to suggest that people are motivated primarily by considerations of narrow self-interest and that they are unwilling to incur significant costs even to address what may be a serious existential threat.

To be sure, some people would accept that they have a moral obligation to help remedy climate change. But one needn’t be unduly skeptical about the motivational efficacy of morality to recognize that moral motivation is not always sufficient to defeat countervailing considerations, especially when discharging one’s moral responsibilities would be very costly and when it would involve doing more than simply respecting deontological prohibitions that are already widely recognized. The very fact that people have been so slow to respond to climate change, despite frequent moral exhortations to do so, seems to confirm these doubts.

Yet we are likely to exaggerate the seriousness of the motivational deficit if we rely uncritically on a simple, reductive distinction between narrowly self-interested motives and considerations of moral obligation. If we insist that these are the only relevant human motives, then we may well despair of overcoming the motivational deficit. We may conclude that people’s sense of moral obligation is simply too weak and variable to prevail in a sustained and systematic conflict with considerations of individual self-interest. But the problem is less with our motives than with the reductive distinction, and the historicist sensibility makes this clear.

Consider the main elements of that sensibility as I am understanding it. First, it includes a direct, affective concern for the future of humanity, a desire that the chain of
generations should extend into the future under conditions conducive to human flourishing. Second, it includes a tendency to interpret the meaning and significance of our own lives as dependent on our participation in the ongoing succession of human lives. Third, it includes an implicit understanding that the worth of many of our activities depends on the survival and flourishing of humanity after our deaths. Understood in this way, the historicist sensibility helps shed light on people’s attitudes toward climate change. Despite our slow response to the crisis, concerns about climate change have been growing in recent years, and increasingly they are tinged with urgency and at times even something approaching despair. How are we to interpret these concerns? I do not think they can plausibly be decomposed into the two ostensibly competing elements of narrow self-interest and a sense of moral obligation. Neither of these motives individually, nor the combination of them taken together, adequately explains the profound dismay that increasing numbers of people feel when contemplating climate change. If, by contrast, we understand people as possessing what I have called a historicist sensibility, then this kind of reaction seems completely straightforward and more or less what one would expect.

The lesson I draw from this is that the historicist sensibility, and the love of humanity that it incorporates, is a potential motivational resource that may in principle be mobilized to support policies designed to address climate change and other existential threats. Of course, the mere existence of this sensibility will not by itself make the motivational problem disappear, or else it would already have vanished. The

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I have been discussing climate change as if it were independent of the questions about population discussed in the first part of the paper. But to the extent that human population growth has contributed to climate change, falling fertility rates might do something to ameliorate the problem. To that extent, our love of humanity might give us reason to welcome rather than deplore a decline in the human population. Still, there is a limit to the degree of depopulation that is compatible with a love of humanity.
historicist sensibility needs to be nurtured, its relevance for climate policy needs to be highlighted, and its motivational potential needs to be developed. But we cannot do these things unless we first recognize it for what it is. In the meantime, we should not exaggerate the problem of the motivational deficit by assuming that the only available motives that may affect people’s responsiveness to climate policies are those of self-interest and moral obligation. The historicist sensibility and its associated love of humanity can no more be decomposed into those two reductive categories than can one individual’s love for another.

The motivational significance of the historicist sensibility is also evident from the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost as soon as the pandemic began, it became clear that older people are much more likely than younger people to suffer serious illness and death from COVID. In this respect, older people have a stronger interest than younger people in the adoption of burdensome measures designed to control the disease. Yet despite variation among and within societies in people’s levels of compliance with such measures, and despite the extreme politicization of some of those measures in a few countries, such as the United States, there has nevertheless been a significant degree of compliance across all age groups. Although the level of compliance among younger adults has undoubtedly been lower than that among older adults, and although there have been widely publicized instances of young people flouting social distancing requirements at beaches, bars, and parties, the fact remains that many younger people have complied with such measures, to one degree or another, despite the fact that the benefits of their doing so accrue disproportionately to older people. One early study by a group of Stanford researchers found that compliance among adults was lowest in the 18-31 age group, but even that group had a
compliance rate of 52.4%. Why have young people been willing to comply with social distancing and other such measures, to whatever extent they have? Some of them may have felt that the risks to their own age group, although less severe than the risks to older people, were nevertheless significant enough to warrant compliance for purely prudential reasons. Others may have been concerned to avoid penalties for noncompliance, where such penalties have been enforced. And still others may have wished to protect older members of their families. But I believe that there has also been another motivational factor at work – although it can be difficult to disentangle from the previous one – and that is a kind of solidarity among the generations.  

Before explaining what I mean, let me mention one complication. COVID-19 has disproportionately affected not only older people but other groups as well. According to the Centers for Disease Control, for example, there have been higher rates of COVID-related hospitalization or death among “non-Hispanic black persons, Hispanics and Latinos, and American Indians/Alaska Natives.” Low-income communities have also been disproportionately affected, with the inhabitants of New York City’s poorest neighborhoods dying at more than twice the rate of people in more affluent neighborhoods. These discrepancies reflect the wider social and economic inequalities


21 It would be very interesting to be able to compare levels of compliance by age group during the COVID-19 pandemic with those during the 1918 “Spanish” flu pandemic, which disproportionately affected young people rather than old people.


in our society. Under conditions of heavily racialized poverty and economic inequality, poor people and people of color often end up suffering disproportionately from the spread of a disease even if it doesn’t directly expose them to greater risk. To the extent that they cannot afford the conditions that make contracting the disease less likely, or cannot get adequate medical treatment if they do contract it, they are more likely to develop serious illness and suffer its consequences. Certainly this has been true of the 2020 pandemic, one of whose ugliest features has been the shameful disparity in the conditions of life and death for affected individuals belonging to different social and economic groups. But the greater vulnerability of older people is substantially independent of considerations of poverty and inequality. Older people are more vulnerable than younger people as a matter of sheer biology. In that sense, COVID-19 directly targets older people to a greater extent than it does younger people. And the fact that it directly targets older people, and is widely seen as so doing, is the reason it is apt to elicit feelings of intergenerational solidarity in particular.

What underlies the phenomenon of intergenerational solidarity? Let me highlight two factors. The first is the universality of life stages. Our lives all begin with birth and end with death. And unless we die prematurely, we all pass through the same sequence of stages on the path from birth to death. We all start out as infants and end up as old people. In this sense, the problems of old age are everyone’s problems. The second factor is that each of us is a participant in the chain of human generations. We all have biological ancestors and many of us have or will have biological

descendants. Almost all of us were raised and nurtured by members of previous
generations and many of us will raise and nurture members of subsequent generations.
For these reasons and others, most of us have strong ties of sentiment and identification
with at least some people in both earlier and later generations.

These factors tend to encourage feelings of intergenerational solidarity. They
also help to illuminate the sources and the effects of our historicist sensibility, which, as
I have said, includes a love of humanity and a tendency to see the meaning and
significance of our lives as depending on our participation in the chain of human
generations. That sensibility is shaped by our understanding of our lives as originating
with previous generations, unfolding over time in accordance with a universal sequence
of temporal stages, and then giving way to subsequent generations. And insofar as we
have such a sensibility, threats to other generations have a special salience for us. As the
cases of climate change and COVID-19 seem to me to indicate, our historicist sensibility
primes us for motivational responsiveness to threats to generations other than our own,
although such responsiveness needs to be encouraged and supported in the face of
competing pressures.

I don’t want to exaggerate the strength of our intergenerational solidarity.
People differ in their susceptibility to the considerations that support intergenerational
solidarity, and the uneven compliance by the young with measures designed to
minimize the spread of COVID-19 illustrates the point. More generally, it is not
uncommon for generational cohorts to pursue their own interests at the expense of
other generational cohorts. There are often political conflicts between young and old
for money, power, and resources. That is why there is a subject of intergenerational
justice.
Furthermore, intergenerational solidarity is vulnerable to being undermined when there are powerful interests that oppose the policies it would support. In the case of COVID-19, for example, politicians and public officials who have thought it would benefit them to defeat pandemic-control measures have often claimed or insinuated that the disease was the fault of some other country or group or that it affected only those in some disfavored racial or regional or economic category. In this respect, the very fact that COVID has disproportionately affected poor people and people of color, not to mention prisoners, immigrant agricultural workers, and other marginalized groups, has provided a convenient way for unscrupulous public officials to represent the disease, implicitly or explicitly, as somebody else’s problem: the problem of some community or group whose members the rest of us are encouraged to see as expendable or unworthy of full consideration. The intended upshot has been to undermine all the motives that might support the forms of compliance these officials oppose. Like other such motives, intergenerational solidarity is sadly vulnerable to being undermined in this way. But if it is important not to exaggerate the strength or extent of our intergenerational solidarity, it is equally important not to neglect or ignore it. It is, I believe, one of the factors that has contributed to people’s willingness to comply with pandemic-control measures. And since its strength and its effectiveness depend on how much social and political encouragement it receives, they are to some extent up to us.

One final word. I have been talking in this section about the motivational significance of our historicist sensibility, which I have taken to include a love of humanity. Some will protest that a historicist sensibility need not include a love of humanity and that often it does not. Often it includes only the love of a particular nation or people. I have argued, however, that, whether we recognize it or not, many of us have a love of humanity in addition to whatever particularist allegiances we may
have. This means we possess a historicist sensibility that does not take an exclusively particularist form. Indeed, one lesson of this discussion is that we should not equate historicism with particularism, nor universalism with ahistorical individualism. All of us are situated in time and all of us belong to a chain of generations. Those with exclusively particularist loyalties have no more reason than anyone else to attach significance to these facts, and those without such loyalties have no less.

Conclusion

These reflections illustrate the general themes for which I have been arguing. The love of humanity is one element in our complex motivational repertoire. I have insisted, in the face of skeptical doubts, that it is a genuine element and that it is independent both of our love of particular individuals and of our attachment to particular communities and ways of life. Acknowledging its existence is essential if we are to achieve self-understanding and avoid various forms of bad faith. But the love of humanity also has practical significance. It makes its presence felt not only in our reactions to hypothetical scenarios about human extinction or depopulation but also in our responses to current crises such as climate change and COVID. In these cases and more generally, it is a significant motivational resource that may be harnessed to help mobilize people to address threats to humanity’s survival and flourishing.

At the same time, it is certainly not the only element in our motivational repertoire nor, in general, is it the most conspicuous one. Much of the time, as I have said, we scarcely even acknowledge its reality. And there are other motives that all too often lead us to take a hostile or adversarial stance toward other groups, communities, or nations. These other motives include, of course, narrowly self-interested concerns.
They also include the particularistic attachments to communities and nations from which I have taken pains to distinguish the love of humanity, but which remain potent motivational factors in their own right. Although self-interested concerns and particularistic attachments have important roles to play in shaping our values and giving structure to our lives, we know from bitter experience how easily they can be harnessed and manipulated to fan the flames of deadly conflict among different nations, communities, and groups. Despite our latent love of humanity, we are capable of the most monstrous evil, never more so than when our understanding of our own interests or of the nature of our communal allegiances is structured and channeled in the wrong directions. This depressingly familiar fact can make it seem incredible to suggest that we possess a love of humanity at all. Yet there is no contradiction in saying both that we possess a love of humanity and that we have a capacity for almost unspeakable cruelty and inhumanity. Not only is there no contradiction in saying both of these things, they are both true. We are complex creatures, and this is who we are. But because it is who we are, it is especially important to recognize and to nurture our love of humanity. The alternative may be, not only that we will continue to allow or to undertake atrocities on a gigantic scale, but that we will barrel headlong toward our own destruction, as, alas, we sometimes seem determined to do.¹¹

¹¹ Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis Trilogy gives striking fictional expression to the idea that humanity’s self-destructive tendencies will never be overcome. Her message is that these tendencies will inevitably lead to disaster and that it would be better, however much we might view it as tragic, if human beings were superseded by a superior species. Butler’s novels are a sobering counterpoint to P.D. James’s The Children of Men, though the lessons of the two do not seem to me incompatible. I am grateful to Martin Stone for recommending Butler’s books to me. (The complete trilogy, comprising Dawn, Adulthood Rites, and Imago, has been published in one volume under the title Lilith’s Brood [Grand Central Publishing, 2000].)