

Finitude, Failure, and Human Freedom

Jeff Noonan

Professor of Philosophy,

University of Windsor

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Human beings, writes St. Paul in 1 Corinthians, are “sown in a natural body,” dishonourable and weak, liable to temptation, sin, and death, but, through the grace of God, “rises a spiritual body.”¹ Resurrection is thus transcendence of the weakness and the mortality—the finitude—of the fleshy, earthly body by the spiritual, heavenly body. Life is only fully realized in this spiritual body, for in materially embodied form the truth of life—the divine power to shape and transform and create—is obscured by physical need and desire. As modern natural science began to emerge from late medieval natural philosophy in the seventeenth century, the Christian idea of a spiritual body came to be regarded as irrational superstition, a vain hope born of fear of death, or at best, a moralistic condemnation of the injustices greed causes human beings to visit upon each other, a fantasy of a world beyond which will redeem earthly pain, the “heart of a heartless world.”² And yet, even as science was laying the foundation for charges of superstition and irrationality, it was taking up St. Paul’s religious fight against the weakness of the flesh. Writing in the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes set science the task of making us “lords and possessors of nature” through the invention “an infinity of arts which would enable

¹ St Paul, “The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians,” *A New Translation of the Bible*, James Moffat, trans., (Hodder and Stoughton: London), 1934, 15:44, p. 221.

² Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law (Introduction),” *Collected Works, Volume 3*, (International Publishers: New York), 1975, p. 175.

us to enjoy, without any trouble, the fruits of the earth ... and for the conservation of health ... which is ... of all the blessings of this life ... the first and fundamental one.”³ For both Descartes, who laid some of the foundations for modern natural science, and for St. Paul, the goodness of materially finite life is compromised by needs for resources outside of the self the absence of which can cause pain, suffering, and limited capacity to realise one’s goals. While religion looks to heaven and science to earth for solutions, it would not be wrong to say that both are animated by the goal of saving human beings from what they regard as the intolerable sufferings to which finite flesh is liable.

Paradoxically, the more insight natural science has gained into the mechanisms of life, the more spiritual its goals have become to the point where, at the outer limits of scientific speculation in the second decade of the twenty-first century, its highest goal, its culminating point is a “singularity,” the emergence of a “spiritual machine,” a robotic “transcendent mind” which will-- just like St. Paul’s spiritual body, realise the truth of life by shedding the skin of material imperfection.⁴ True, the spiritual machine will be the product of genetic, computer, and robotic engineering, rather than prayer, faith, and the grace of God, but this difference, to my mind, is less interesting than the mission to redeem the finite flesh that underlies as a hidden point of unity the religious and the scientific endeavours. It is the coherence of this underlying, unifying assumption that finite life is unbearably flawed, and thus that good lives demand the transcendence of the flesh, that I aim to hold up to philosophical scrutiny today.

³ Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Discourse on Method and Meditations*, (Promethues Books: Buffalo), 1989, p. 48.

⁴ The terms “singularity” and “spiritual machine” derive from the work of ray Kurzweil, which the robotic “transcendent mind” comes from the roboticist Hans Moravec. See, respectively, Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, (New York: Penguin Books), 2005; Hans Moravec, *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1999.

My argument derives from the principles of materialist ethics I first elaborated in *Materialist Ethics and Life Value*.⁵ There I tried to articulate and defend a conception of the good for human beings understood as finite, embodied living agents, dependent on nature and interdependent within social relationships. Working with the idea of life-value first systematically developed by John McMurtry, my argument maintained that good lives were characterised by the free development, expression, and enjoyment of our capacities for experience, relationship, cognition, imagination, and productive creation. Such a good life is always conditional upon the satisfaction of natural, socio-cultural, and temporal life-requirements. As the capstone of a *materialist* ethics, this conception of good *lives* refuses the hopes for religious transcendence. It regards human beings as capable of understanding and overcoming *externally imposed limitations on their well-being*, but also as capable of distinguishing externally imposed limitations on well-being (politically motivated starvation, for example) from *internal constitutive conditions of being human* (the need to eat, for example). The later are not, or so I will argue today, illegitimate impediments which must be overcome if we are to enjoy good lives, but rather untranscendable existential frames within which good lives are realized (or not). This difference is ignored by those who, for religious or scientific reasons, argue that finitude is incompatible with goodness such that *any* limitation on our power to realize our projects and capacities is tantamount to an absolute limitation on the goodness of life.

My argument will be set out in three steps. In the first I will explicate more systematically the underlying connection between the religious and transhumanist belief that good lives depend upon overcoming all the limitations entailed by material finitude. In the next step I will explain the difference between external limitations and internal constitutive conditions

⁵ Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life Value*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2012.

of existence. This difference is rejected by religious and scientific absolute perfectionists, but is central to materialist ethics, and therefore to any ethics appropriate to the embodied beings we are. In the final section I will defend the materiality and finitude of human existence as sufficient for the realization of all valuable human purposes, provided that each person understands the goodness of individual life not in absolute — (life is not good unless I am capable of anything I conceive) but contributory terms. In this way the finitude of human life is not regarded as a burden, but a challenge to realise one's affective, cognitive, imaginative, relational, and creative capacities in particular ways which are enjoyable for self, life-enabling for others in the present, and consistent with the natural and social conditions for the possibility of good lives for human beings as yet unborn.

I: Flesh as Tempter and Design Flaw

Embodied beings require objects outside of themselves as requirements of life-maintenance and development, requirements which they *feel* as needs. Neediness and finitude are in a sense synonymous for living things—we cannot maintain our lives and realise our capacities through force of will, but must satisfy definite material conditions of action, which, even in the most propitious conditions, we can only succeed in doing for eight or nine decades. For the religious believer in a transcendent afterlife, the finitude of the body is problematic because it can lead us to sin—to direct our desire towards the wrong object, wasting the time we have on earth in pursuits regarded as immoral. The transhumanist believer in cybernetic salvation rejects religious moralism, but also regards the finitude of the body as problematic because it limits the range and depth of experiences we can have and the number of projects we can successfully realise. Despite the opposed valuations of the morality of desire, the Christian

believer in a spiritual otherworld and the transhumanist hedonist both identify the finite material body as the key impediment to a good life.

For St. Paul, the good life is not possible on earth because sinful desire blinds us to the existence of our higher spiritual capacities and thus impedes our ascension to heaven: “Make no mistake about it, neither the immoral, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor catamites, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor the lustful, nor the drunken, nor the abusive, nor robbers will inherit the Realm of God.⁶ The problem is not that the higher spiritual capacities do not exist within us—St. Paul notes that when we sin against God we in fact sin against ourselves, our true nature-- but that these higher capacities cannot be realized on earth, occluded as they are by temptations of the flesh. Earthly life requires self-discipline to maintain as far as possible one’s spiritual purity so that one makes oneself worthy of salvation and eternal spiritual life.

The underlying logic of Paul’s argument is articulated free from any particular attachment to the dogmas of Christian theology by Kant in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. There Kant claims that a rational being by its very nature pursues the highest conceivable good, complete conformity of its will to the moral law. On earth, such conformity is impossible, because our sensual material nature always mixes acts of good will with partial, selfish, and material motives. If, nevertheless, it is true that our rational nature forms the idea of the highest possible good as the ultimate end of all our actions, then we are rationally entitled to infer the existence of the necessary condition of our realizing the *summum bonum*, an immortal soul and a spiritual realm in which it can one day act free from all sensuous motives. “Now what is signified by complete conformity of the will to the moral law is called *holiness*, this being a state of perfection which cannot be attained by a rational being belonging to the world of sense ... The

⁶1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

summum bonum is thus possible, practically speaking, only if one is entitled to presuppose the immortality of the soul.”⁷ If a highest good is not only *conceivable* but *realizable*, then any lesser good in comparison would be no good at all, since that which makes the qualified good a good is that which it shares with the highest possible good.

For any being capable of understanding the difference, to prefer a qualified good to a *realizable* highest possible good is irrational. Once one properly understands the difference between the transitory pleasures of the flesh and the highest possible good, one will come to regard anything which systematically impedes the attainment of the *summum bonum* (or the Realm of God, in St. Paul’s words) as a burden to be cast off. Since it is the needs and desires of the material body that connect us with material nature and each other, which tempts us towards partiality to our own case and all the immorality such partiality brings in its train, the body must somehow be overcome as the essential condition of our realizing the highest possible good.

While neither St. Paul’s dogmatic nor Kant’s philosophised version of the Christian idea of immortality is conformable to the demands of natural scientific reason for empirical evidence and specification of measurable causes, there is nothing unacceptably irrational or superstitious in the definition of the good for human beings in terms of the realization of certain potentialities our nature encodes. All contemporary species of materialist ethics (understood broadly as any theory that defines a good for human beings without positing the existence of non-material agents or element, gods or souls, as conditions of existence of that good) in fact preserve the basic conceptual relationship between the realization of certain capacities of the human organism

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press), 1998, pp. 153-4.

and what it is good for us to do, be, and become.⁸ The key difference is that materialist conceptions of capacity realization will have to accept that a qualified good is all that it is possible for individual, finite human beings to achieve. Given the centuries long connection between materialist ontologies and the development of natural science, one would assume that a commitment to science means a commitment to a materialist ontology, and a commitment to materialist ontology entails a commitment to a some version of a materialist ethics (if any ethics at all) that accepts limitation as necessary to any *real* good for human beings. As I alluded to in the introduction, this assumption would be incorrect. Paradoxically, the cutting edge of research in artificial intelligence, genomics, and robotics has made credible the idea of absolute realizability of human capacities, i.e., of an absolute good realizable in each individual life. More paradoxically, this idea, made credible by extrapolation from natural science, relies upon an analogous understanding of the material human body as the primary impediment to the realization of this good as we found in the religious conception.

For transhumanists, the body is not demonized as the cause of sin, but lamented as the site of meagre pleasures and constrained capacities for experience and activity. The problem with biological systems is that they are the product of blind evolutionary forces which are incapable of optimizing the capacities that have emerged in the struggle for survival.⁹ Natural selection is about survival until reproductive age, not cultivation of aesthetic sensibility, deepening of scientific insight, refinement and intensification of pleasures. Transhumanism thus makes “human nature a project of technical mastery,” which, if successful would lead to the

⁸ See Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life Value*, pp. 3-14.

⁹ See David Pearce, *The Hedonistic Imperative*, <http://hedweb.com/hedethic/hedonist.htm#saving> (accessed September 18th, 2013)

supersession of the biological substrate of life altogether.¹⁰ As Kurzweil, the most audacious defender of the project maintains, the problem with biological brains is that most of its complexity “is devoted to maintaining life-support functions, not its information processing capabilities.”¹¹ For transhumanists, all that is good in life is reducible to information processing. Thus, if the information processing capacities of the human brain could be freed from its slow and inefficient biological platform, and that artificial intelligence set on its own evolutionary journey, it could approach infinite processing capacity—nothing that could be computed would be beyond such a superintelligence’s ability. “Ultimately, Kurzweil maintains, we will be able to port our mental processes to a more suitable computational substrate. The our minds won’t have to stay so small.” How large can they become? Ultimately, Kurzweil and allies lies the roboticist Hans Moravec predict that the entire universe can become an intelligent computing machine.¹²

This universal superintelligence would supercede the distinction between matter and information, consciousness and an external material world. In the words of Bostrom, it would have become “autopotens” capable of making reality whatever it thinks it to be, there no longer being a meaningful distinction between self-consciousness and the external material world in which self-consciousness struggles to realize its projects. An autopotent superintelligence would have “complete power over and operational understanding of themselves, so there are able to remold themselves at will and assume any state they choose ... These posthumans have thorough control over their environment, so that they can make molecularly exact copies of objects and

¹⁰ Nick Bostrom, “Dignity and Enhancement,” p.20, <http://www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/dignity-enhancement.pdf> (accessed, September 4th, 2013)

¹¹ Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, p. 127.

¹² See Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, pp. 387-391; Moravec, *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*, p. 166.

implement any physical design.”¹³ The weakness of the flesh in St. Paul referred to its incapacity to constrain its immoral desires, a species of incomplete self-mastery. If freedom from sin requires complete self-mastery, then the posthuman superintelligence will be free from sin, because capable of complete self-mastery. Being capable of anything, these posthumans will need nothing from each other, and needing nothing from each other, they will lack all reason to exploit, use, or abuse each other.

This religious goal is not only implied, it is explicitly affirmed by Kurzweil. Should the evolutionary dynamic he predicts actually emerge, a “singularity” will be attained whereby the processing capacity of artificial intelligence takes off at ever accelerating rates towards the outer limit of infinite computational power. As the artificial intelligence approaches this limit, it becomes, not figuratively, for Kurzweil, but literally, what monotheistic religions have meant by God: “Evolution moves towards greater complexity, greater elegance, greater knowledge, greater intelligence, greater beauty, greater creativity, and greater levels of subtle attributes such as love. In every monotheistic religion God is likewise described as all of these qualities, only without any limitation ... Of course, even the accelerating growth of evolution never achieves an infinite level but ... it moves inexorably toward this conception of God ... We can regard, therefore, the freeing of our thinking from the severe limitations of its biological form to be an essentially spiritual enterprise.”¹⁴ As the body leads us into sin and impairs our progress to the kingdom of heaven, so too it leads us into slow computation speeds and impairs our progress to the kingdom of the spiritual machine. Whether you object to Kurzweil’s eccentric, teleological understanding of evolution and regard his and his fellow transhumanist’s projection mere fantasy, another version of religion’s “heart of a heartless world,” or not, the key point to take

¹³ Bostrom, “Dignity and Enhancement, pp. 29-30.

¹⁴ Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, p. 389.

away for present purposes is the claim, made by both the orthodox religious believer and the transhumanist scientist that embodied material life is of meagre value. The highest goods conceivable by human beings are not attainable by biological organisms. Therefore, our biological finitude must be overcome. It is time to begin to put this claim to the test by examining the role that material limitations play in human life, and whether all material limitations are, as the transhumanists and religious believers think, equally impediments to the realization of the human good.

II: External Limitations and Internal Constitutive Conditions

All material elements and entities are defined by the specific limitations that separate them off from other material things. Elements and the complex wholes built out of them — atoms, molecules, living entities, societies- can interact to form dynamic systems because they are different from each other. In material nature, these interactions are governed by blind mechanical forces and causes, but out of these blind interactions over the course of natural history has emerged self-replicating life, and out of self-replicating life has evolved sentient and then socially self-conscious life-forms (human beings). Once sentience and then social self-consciousness emerge, the possibility of reflectively understanding who and what one is becomes possible. While an electron does not know that it is not a proton, a human being does know that it is not a bear, or a god, although it can imagine itself to be either.

The human power to imagine different possibilities, combined with its self-understanding, leads human action in two distinct but interrelated directions. On the one hand, our self-understanding leads us to seek out and maintain connection with that in the natural world which enables us to maintain our biological functioning. Knowledge of our specific

material nature leads us to knowledge of basic physical-organic life-requirements, and to forms of action that appropriate from nature that in its resources which enables our lives to continue. That in any resource which satisfies a life-requirement I will call its instrumental life-value, to indicate that it is an objective means by which the goal of life-maintenance is furthered. The general requirement that all human beings, indeed, all living things, have for resources outside of themselves is an external limitation that channels at least some of their action in the direction of regularly satisfying those requirements.

Unlike other life forms, human beings are capable of making their life-requirements themselves the object of reflective thought. Once we become conscious of that which it is nutritious to eat, we can set ourselves the goal of re-organizing the natural environment in ways conducive to producing food security. Once we become conscious of the way in which certain plants heal certain ailments, we can set ourselves the task of isolating the chemical compounds responsible for the medicinal effect, and working to synthesise them in more pure forms to enhance the natural function. In other words, confronted with external limitations on our capacity to maintain life, we gradually build up a social world out of nature. The original function of society is to protect and maintain life, but as basic life-resources accumulate in greater amounts, more time for the free exercise of intelligence was created, and people turned to the task of reflecting on problems of properly human life- governance, morality, legitimate and illegitimate modes of interaction and relationship, beauty, and the problem of the good life overall.

Once a social world of values and institutions has been built up out of the givenness of nature, two new problems arise. On the one hand, a second, properly social form of external limitation arises. The first external limitation on life is the general requirement for resources

outside of the self. If the self cannot find food, it cannot nourish itself with the thought that it needs food, and it suffers starvation as a consequence. Once we have mastered the problems of agriculture, and assuming no catastrophic meteorological events intervene, the problem of food shortages, for example, should have been solved. But it has not, because in complex societies access to food is generally mediated by some means of exchange, which, if people do not possess it, will result in their being deprived of the resource they need. Social impediments to accessing the resources that we require constitute a second form of external limitation of the life of the self, a limitation that cannot be willed away, but which nevertheless differs from natural external limitations in being *wrong*, and not just an unfortunate fact. The problem of right and wrong, just and unjust enters into the field of social relationships and interactions in a way that it does not enter into the field of natural interactions because there is a voluntary element to social formations which makes them alterable in the direction of more comprehensively universal and inclusive value systems. There is nothing we can do about our need to eat, but we can decommodify food to ensure that everyone is able to access nutritious food.

Be that as it may, what interests me here is not the difference but the similarity between natural and external limitations on human life. Historically, both have given impetus to collective struggles to mitigate, ameliorate, and overcome the threats they pose to the maintenance and development of life. Science has sought to increase crop yields and find better means of treating waste water while political movements have struggled to universalise care and concern for all human beings regardless of the concrete differences that mark us. But no matter how deeply science penetrated into the structures and dynamics of material nature in search of better means of preserving life, and no matter how lofty the ideals of liberatory political movements, they have, until the twentieth century, implicitly respected a difference between

external limitations that threaten life and *internal constitutive conditions of being human*. That is, the goals they set for themselves presupposed certain defining limitations of human being itself. The struggle for food presupposed the need to eat, the struggle for democracy presupposed an individual need to participate in the development of the laws that would govern the collective life of which the individual was part, and so on. With the emergence of knowledge of the human genetic code in the mid-twentieth century, the line distinguishing external from internal limitations began to blur. It became possible to ask—how should we solve the problem of food, by ensuring we have a sufficient and universally available supply, or by re-engineering ourselves so that we no longer require to eat it?

The superintelligences imagined by transhumanism would be the outcome of the supersession of *all* limitations on the realization of creative and intellectual and productive capacities. While this would appear to fulfill the goal of both religion and science—identification and understanding and satisfaction of the conditions for the full and complete realization of the good for human beings, I want to suggest that the opposite would in fact be the case. Freeing human capacity realization from the limits defined by our inner constitutive conditions of being human, thereby eliminating once for all external reality as a barrier to complete realization of our projects and goals, would not lead to the full and complete realization of the good in the ‘life’ in each posthuman; it would in fact be the negation of any such good. To have grown in power beyond all inner constitutive limitations and thus to overcome the difference between one’s goals and external reality (“external reality” being nothing more than what it is programmed to be from moment to moment) is in fact not to *be* anything at all, and thus to have no *good* proper to your constitution.

All human beings, in fact, all living things, are impelled to action first by the need to connect and maintain access to that which they require in order to live. Animate motion is first of all in the service of survival. The answer to McMurtry's question: "Is there any moment of life beauty in the animal kingdom of intense color, grace and motion that is not enhanced by the predator pattern?" is no, because without the threat to existence posed by the predator, "the entire field of animal movement in vibratory space would be sapped of the expression of what incites its plenum of life actions."¹⁵ While human beings are capable of social organization that does without the raw predatory instincts of the animal world, it nevertheless analogously requires a background consciousness of threats to survival to instigate activity.

Human cognition and imagination and the struggle to build relationships are first marshalled in the service of maintaining and developing a fragile and precarious life. In sum, we are forced by the finitude that defines us as living material beings to care about the environments and institutions and relationships that define the life-support and life-development systems upon which we depend. All of these things *matter* because if they are removed or damaged or made more oppressive, our lives are damaged or destroyed or made less free, and thus more burdensome and less enjoyable. We *value* each other and are *valued* in turn because, at root, we *require* each other, both as cooperative consociates in the struggle to survive, as competitors and foils against which our own uniqueness may manifest itself, and as friends and lovers who value each other intrinsically and reciprocally. Remove the need to *work* on material nature, to *define* oneself as someone unique but also to interact with others in constructive ways, and to *elicit* desires in others, and we remove all of what animates human life. It is our efforts to make

¹⁵ John McMurtry, "Philosophy Theme: What is Good, What is Evil? The Value of all Values Across Times, Places, and Theories, Chapter 6, The Primary Value Axiom," *Encyclopaedia of Life-Support Systems*, (EOLSS Publishers and UNESCO: Oxford), 2010, p. 104. www.eolss.net. (accessed, September 4th, 2013).

ourselves real in these ways that gives life meaning and purpose, enables us to value our own life and that of others, and motivates us in the struggle to remove as many external limitations on life-value as possible while respecting our constitutive limitations.

The imagined superintelligence is a being that requires no one outside of itself, indeed, requires nothing outside of itself because it is capable of manufacturing everything it requires out of its own inner resources. But these inner resources allow it to make itself into anything logically and physically possible. But the conquest of inner constitutive limitations on its being is not, as the transhumanists imagine it to be, the realization of the telos of life to unfold its capacities without fetter, it is the negation of the fragility and precariousness and uncertainty and limitation— and thus also the joy of awakening another morning, of finishing the poem that kept you awake night after night, of making an impression upon another to whom you are attracted— by machine programming of amusements which are without value just because, as autoprogams of the autopotent computer, they can contain nothing unexpected and cannot but fail to execute properly. The autopotent computer is just a superpowerful video game, offering no real challenge to itself because it is not liable to any sort of harm.

The human good does advance through struggles against natural and social limitations, against scarcity and environmental threats and injustice, oppression, exploitation, and alienation. Overcoming these external limitations creates social *time and space* for the unveiling of the unique capacities of each individual. But in order for this capacity realization to *be good*, and not just *programmed outcome*, it must be *achieved* within the frames set by the constitutive conditions of human life— birth and death, failure and incapacity, liability to disease and injury—i.e., within the finitude of life as a material, embodied being. To conclude I will defend more systematically the claim that the internal constitutive conditions definitive of finite material

human beings are not destructive of the good of capacity realization but necessary existential frames outside of which the life value that defines that sort of good is impossible.

III: Finitude, Existential Freedom, and Life-Value

The birth of a human being, Hannah Arendt argues, is a pure beginning, an event with mechanical causes which introduces a being that disrupts the chains of natural mechanism because possessed of a general capacity for creative action whose outcomes are unpredictable and uncertain. Human beings, unlike programmable machines, have an open future. “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before.”¹⁶ No one can say who this somebody will become, because our identities are not our names or our natural and cultural histories, but what we become over the course of a life which depends in part on what we make ourselves to be. As it stands, no one can say for certain what it is any new child will become, because what he or she becomes depends not only on history, but on the person’s own efforts, whose success or failure is always uncertain, so that projects can go awry and force life along paths unexpected even for the agent living it. What I call our *existential freedom*, our (limited) capacity to shape our own future through our own efforts despite the fact that we confront the external limitations of natural and social environment and context depends upon precisely the uncertainties and infirmities that keep the future open even for the one actively trying to shape it.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 178.

As we have seen, religious and transhumanist critics of material embodied life attack precisely this existential freedom. The end goal of both is transcendence of the weak, mortal, and, incompetent flesh and thus perfect functioning. Perfect functioning means execution of the plan and achievement of the desired results without distraction, deviation from program or, possibility of failure. The external limitations posed by a material world of things and other people have been overcome. In effect, we are asked to substitute a model of closed circuit machine-functioning for an open horizon of life-activity. The *programming* of life, by religious dogma, but much more so by its genetic re-engineering and robotic replacement, is the destruction of life by machinic functioning. Hans Jonas could see clearly this depth problem even in the 1970s. For the genetically engineered person, “the trial of life has been cheated of its enticing (also frightening) openness; the past has been made to pre-empt the future as the spurious knowledge of it in the most intimate sphere, “Who am I?,” which must be a secret to the seeker after an answer and can find its answer only with the secret there as a condition of the search—indeed, as a condition of *becoming* what then may be the answer. ... In brief, he is antecedently robbed of the *freedom* which only under the protection of ignorance can thrive; and to rob a human-to-be of that freedom deliberately is an inexcusable crime that must not be committed even once.”¹⁷ It will not do, as defenders of genetic engineering sometimes reply when confronted by arguments such as this, that genetic engineering will not unburden people of the necessity of striving and that genes are not the sole causes of successful capacity realization. As we have already seen, the *intention* behind genetic engineering is not to increase the statistical probability of the manifestation of certain desirable traits, but first to *guarantee* it, and thus to set in train a process that leads to purely self-determining beings for whom the idea of an open

¹⁷ Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 164.

future is meaningless, because it produces its reality out of itself. Its existence is a function of what it programs itself to be, and it cannot program itself to be ignorant of the program it writes and runs.

This sort of programmed existence might be tolerable for a machine, but for any human being, or any future creature with any conscious attachment to what it once was— a fragile material organism which cared about its conditions of existence and its relationships with others, that knew the excitement of setting in train a course of action whose outcome was uncertainty, was born with genetic predispositions which were unknown to her or him and unplanned by his or her parents, who with *great difficulty* could strive to keep branching and deepening and expanding his or her sentient, cognitive, imaginative, and practical creative capacities, against the stasis of middle and old age, that had to endure the pains of failed plans, fractured relationships, loss and death— life as in effect a video game would soon prove intolerable.¹⁸ The life-value of capacity realization is expressed for others in the ways in the achieved results (or the example noble failure represents) contribute to the pursuit of their own life-valuable goals, and for the self, in the enjoyment and sense of accomplishment it brings. But real enjoyment requires *effort in the context of uncertainty*. That is why the games of children do not interest adults, they make no demands upon us. That is why speed exhilarates us—the faster we go, the more dangerous a crash would be. That is why a life well lived involves on-going efforts to outdo ourselves—repetition makes us feel emotionally and intellectually dead. That is why friends and lovers are so valuable to us—they are independent people who had to decide that they valued us as much and in the same way as we valued them. An infinitely powerful machine

¹⁸ As Bernard Williams speculated immortality would be for a normal human. See Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the tedium of Immortality,” *Problems of the Self*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1973, pp. 82-100.

could simply produce out of itself ever more complex games, simulated risks, “virtual” friends and lovers. If it were anything like a self-conscious human intelligence, it would know that its friends were not really friends because they were not independent beings choosing to be friends with it, and it would know that the risks it programmed for itself were not real risks because not coming from a hard world indifferent to its survival. And that would be just as unbearable for it as it would be, as it is, for a human being today. On the other hand, if the machine is not-self-conscious but just a much more powerful computer, it is in no sense living and therefore it has no capacities to strive to realize. Either way, the goal of unleashing an evolutionary dynamic that would terminate in the existence of such a being at the expense of materially embodied life as we know it is *existentially life-incoherent*.

Social policies or the cumulative effects of individual choices are life-incoherent when they severely damage, degrade, or destroy the natural field of life-support (without which we cannot live) or when they turn the purpose of the field of social life from institutionalized support for the universal and comprehensive development of human capacities in each and all to the exploitation and degradation of the subaltern for the sake of the private wealth and power of ruling groups.¹⁹ Put in the terms of my argument, actions and policies become naturally and socially life-incoherent when they proceed as if there were no external limitations on human action, i.e., that we could burn unlimited amounts of fossil fuels, because the temperature of the earth did not matter to us, or we could designate a group of humans with a different skin colour “inferiors: and treat them like slaves because how we treat other people is of no concern to them and will not ultimately provoke rebellion. By like reasoning, I argue that social policies are

¹⁹ The idea of existential life-incoherence derives from the *life-coherence principle* formulated by McMurtry. See John McMurtry, “Human Rights Versus Corporate Rights: Life-Value, the Civil Commons, and Social Justice,” *Studies in Social Justice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2011, p. 14.

existentially life-incoherent when they act as if there were no internal constitutive conditions of human being essentially linked to the possibility of the life-value of the good of capacity realization. One can *imagine* capacity-realization freed from the limitations the material body, natural dependence, and social independence imposes upon it, and conclude that if limited capacity realization is of limited goodness, unlimited capacity realization would be of unlimited, absolute goodness. But capacity realization is good not only because of its results, but also and equally because of the struggle to achieve those results the constitutive limitations of human beings force upon us. If we remove those limitations we remove uncertainty, effort, the possibility of failure, and thus also the possibility of gathering ourselves up anew and trying again. “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail Again. Fail Better,” Beckett writes.²⁰ It is good that we fail as well as succeed, for a final and ultimate success would mean that there is nothing meaningful left for oneself or anyone else to do.

The same holds true with the ultimate problem that our material finitude poses: death. Of all the limitations of organic existence death stands out as the most intolerable to the believer in other world religions and the transhumanist, the greatest crime that nature could perpetrate against human beings. If it would be wrong to say that death is life valuable for the self in an unqualified sense (because it brings to a close the possibility of that person experiencing any further life-value), it would be wrong to believe that death is the absolute negation of life value. First, life lived in the knowledge of the inescapability of death adds urgency to all that we do—it helps to focus attention on what is important, and elicit the efforts necessary to motivate us to pursue it. “An invitation to the dance, Sanatiana argues “is not rendered ironical because the

²⁰ Samuel Beckett, “Worstward HO,” *Nohow On*, (New York: Grove Press), 1980, p. 89.

dance cannot last forever, the youngest of us and the most vigorously wound up, after a few hours, has had enough sinuous stepping and prancing. The transitoriness of things is essential to their physical being ... and is not at all sad in itself.”²¹ Given the fact that we know the dance will end, we can dance as strenuously and sensuously as we can, so that we may derive and share all the joy the dance makes possible, within the finite frame that marks it as a specific region of human activity and interaction. And when it is over, we willingly cede the floor to the next group, *satisfied with our own* share of the experience.

It is not only in terms of intensifying experience that death enables the enjoyment of life-value even as it constantly threatens to bring it to an end for each individual. Knowledge that life will end for each person is also the background against which we come out of ourselves to deeply love others. We care for and love that which we can lose—we cease loving, everyone knows, when we begin to take the object of our love for granted. But for finite, mortal beings nothing can be rationally taken for granted, because we know, rationally, that anything, including ourselves, can be lost at any moment. And so when we keep this precarity of life in mind, we open ourselves towards the object(s) of our love, and strive to live in such ways that increase their love for us, to make ourselves the object of the value our action prove we place on the loved one. As the psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle writes, the development of emotional maturity involves learning to understand others as concrete, specific wholes with their own lives and goals, which we cannot program to do our bidding and to whose specificity we must attune ourselves if we want to establish a relationship: “Over time, we transform a collection of parts into a comprehension of wholes. With this integration, we learn to tolerate disappointment and

²¹ George Santaya, “A Long Way Round to Nirvana: Development of a Suggestion Found in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,” *Some Turns of Thought in Modern Philosophy*, (Charleston, SC: Bibliobazaar), 2007, p. 59.

ambiguity. And we learn to sustain realistic relationships, one must accept others in their complexity ... in their alterity [and thus to] see the world through the eyes of another. Without alterity, there can be no empathy.”²² Without empathy, there can also be no genuine sociality, and thus no politics.

For the superintelligence that programs its outer life from its inner resources, empathy would be impossible because there would be no to empathise with—all its relations are with virtual realities it produces out of its own circuitry. Only finite beings need relate to other finite beings, because finite beings are only ever partial wholes—others have different ideas and goals and talents, and it is worthwhile opening ourselves to them so that we might learn that which we do not already know. But there is more to human relationships than interpersonal mutualistic interaction, there is also the political moment. Empathy builds friendship, but it also builds political movements, as individuals who are separately aware of social problems find like-minded people to build movements with. Here too consciousness of death is essential: consciousness of death forces people to take their lives seriously, and taking life seriously means reflecting upon and coming to understand the general natural and social conditions that must obtain for it to be good, for self or others indifferently, since the *general* conditions are the same in both cases. The life-value of the political commitments of a self-consciously finite, mortal being is that through it we contribute, even if in very small ways, to the improvement of the life-conditions of fellow humans (and other life forms) as yet unborn. We do not achieve immortality in this way, but we extend the *life-value* of our having been beyond the moment and the self-conscious experience that was our life. By thinking of ourselves as members of sustaining natural and social fields of life-support rather than egocentric pleasure machines, we

²² Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, p. 55.

can come to identify contributing to the sustainability of the conditions of life-support and life-development as a moment of our own individual good, repaying that which we have appropriated and adding something unique. When we act for the sake of the good of others, we act politically, as members of social wholes whose private good is diminished if others are left to suffer needlessly. Accepting our finitude means accepting that we require other people in order to live, as other people require us. Ultimately, therefore, it means accepting the responsibility of caring for and about the shared conditions of life, connecting the good of capacity realization to the imperative of service to those conditions, and overcoming, not death and limitation, but the egocentrism that always underlies the demand for immortality.