

## Life without humans: What's the 'voluntary extinction movement'?

**E**uthanasia is usually viewed as a personal experience. But there are movements and philosophers who believe that it would be a good idea if the whole human race were to perish. South African philosopher [David Benatar](#), for instance, argues that bringing people into existence always does them harm. And the [Voluntary Human Extinction Movement](#) advocates the gradual disappearance of mankind.

However, as Thomas Moynihan, of the University of Oxford, writes in [The Conversation](#), these guys are amateurs compared to a nearly forgotten German philosopher, [Eduard von Hartmann](#) (1842-1906).

A disciple of Schopenhauer, von Hartmann believed that all life is suffering and all existence is pain. Therefore, the less life the better. If humanity managed to go extinct, evolution would eventually give rise to another intelligent species which would also experience great suffering. This would “perpetuate the misery of existence”.

Moynihan writes:

Hartmann thought that, as intelligent beings, we are obligated to find a way to eliminate suffering, permanently and universally. He believed that it is up to humanity to “annihilate” the universe: it is our duty, [he wrote](#), to “cause the whole kosmos to disappear”.

In other words, the moral duty of humanity is to find a way to euthanise the universe.

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Hartmann was convinced this was the [purpose of creation](#): that our universe exists in order to evolve beings compassionate and clever enough to decide to abolish existence itself. He imagined this final moment as a shockwave of deadly euthanasia rippling outwards from Earth, blotting out the “existence of this cosmos” until “all its world-lenses and nebulae have been abolished”.

Von Hartmann was vague about how humanity could comply with its destined task, although he was confident that sooner or later appropriate technology would be developed.

Moynihan believes that von Hartmann was mistaken:

Hartmann's philosophy is fascinating. It is also unimaginably wrong. This is because he confuses the eradication of suffering with the eradication of sufferers. Conflating this distinction leads to crazy visions of omnicide. To get rid of suffering you don't need to get rid of sufferers: you could instead try removing the causes of pain. We should eliminate suffering, not the sufferer.

Moynihan has just published a book on the history of human extinction projects, [X-Risk: how humanity discovered its own extinction](#).

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